

## PASSIONATE SEARCH







Charlotte Brontë. A painting by J. H. Thompson, Branwell's artist friend

# PASSIONATE SEARCH

A LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

*by*

MARGARET CROMPTON

*With a frontispiece and 12 pages of  
half-tone illustrations*



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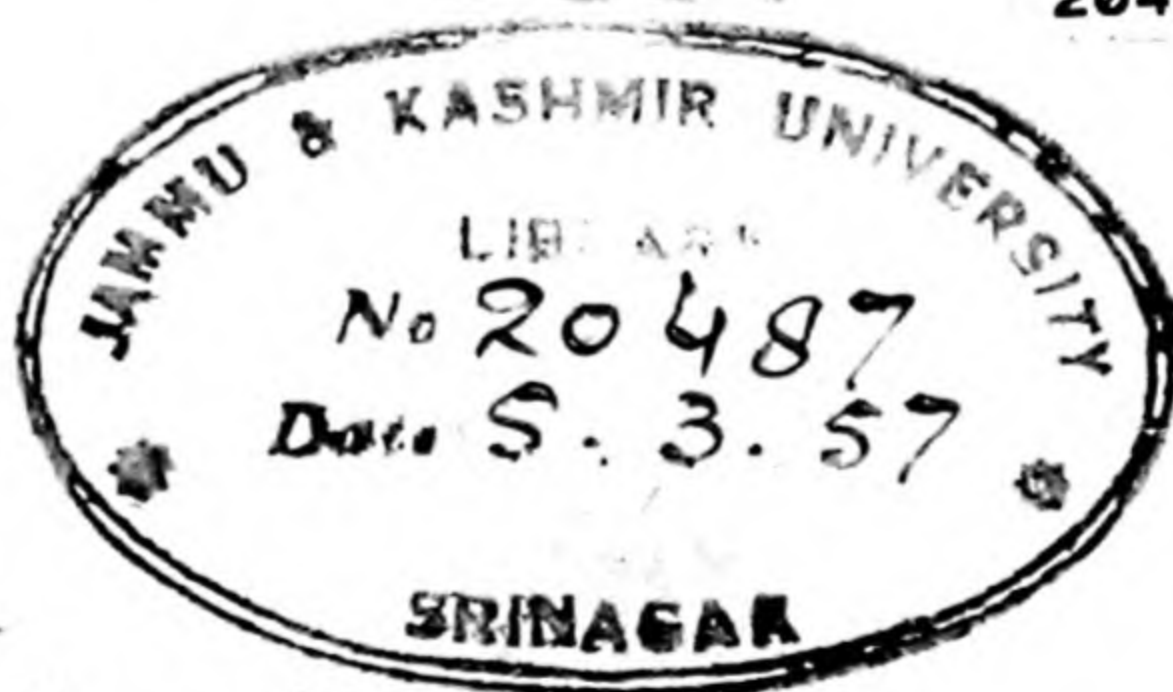
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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF MY SISTER

MARY CHARLOTTE



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## CHAPTER I

# *Charlotte and Branwell*

As usual I address my weekly letter to you, because to you I find the most to say.

CHARLOTTE TO BRANWELL

### I

**C**HARLOTTE BRONTË was born at Thornton in Yorkshire on April 21st, 1816.

Her parents had no great claim to distinction. Her father, an Irishman and a clergyman, was humble by birth but a man of pertinacity, intelligence and ambition. Her mother was a Cornishwoman, the daughter of a Penzance merchant. Why these two estimable but ordinary people should between them have produced children all exceptionally talented, and two at least with genius, is one of the fascinating riddles of life to which there seems to be no satisfactory answer.

Charlotte was the third daughter of the family. Her elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, had been born at Hartshead, before the family moved to Thornton. At Thornton Charlotte's birth was followed in rapid succession by the births of a son, Branwell, and two more daughters, Emily and Anne.

The family were by no means well off. Mr Brontë was one of the ten children of a humble and impecunious farmer in County Down, Ireland. It was with amazing industry and determination that he had raised himself from this poor Irish peasant environment. After modest beginnings as a weaver and a village schoolmaster, he had become tutor to a private family. From there he miraculously transported himself to St. John's College, Cambridge, where he changed his name from the original Brunty to the more aristocratic Brontë, and obtained his B.A. degree. In 1806 he was ordained as a clergyman of the Church of England and given his first curacy in Essex.



At this early period of his life, before disaster overtook him, Patrick Brontë seems to have been a man of great enterprise and ambition. He was tall, attractive and handsome, confident and intelligent. He wrote poems, essays and sermons, and some of these were published. The curacy in Essex was followed by two others in Yorkshire. It was at the second of these, at Hartshead, that he met his future wife, Maria Branwell, who had come from Cornwall on a visit to her uncle. Patrick Brontë was something of a ladies' man and this was not the first time that he had fallen in love. But now he was thirty-five, and he was anxious to settle down.

Maria Branwell immediately attracted him. She was a neat, demure little woman, twenty-nine years old, and an orphan. She, in her turn, was fascinated at once by the impulsive Irish curate with the saucy ways and the Greek profile. Their courtship was smooth and rapid. There are still in existence the letters which Maria Branwell wrote at this time to her future husband. Mr Brontë kept them all his long life and when he was an old man he gave them to Charlotte to read. They are pleasing letters showing an attractive personality. Maria was tender, affectionate, dutiful and pious. She could, too, be teasing, evasive and gay. She loved Patrick and thought of him continually but she was not sure whether it was good for him to tell him so. The letters are compounded of advances and reservations, of protestations of affection and doubts of the propriety of such protestations. Occasionally she chides him for forgetting messages or for keeping her waiting too long for a letter. Through it all there shines the deep luminous thread of a loyal self-sacrificing devotion.

On December 18th, 1812, she and Patrick were married. During the next years from 1813 to 1819 their six children—five daughters and one son—were born to them. These were serene years. There was a fair amount of social life at Thornton and Mr Brontë afterwards looked back on this period as the happiest of his life. A record of these days was perpetuated in the diary of a Miss Elizabeth Firth, also of Thornton. She and her father were devoted



friends of the Brontë family and Elizabeth, who was godmother to three of the children, was so completely absorbed in all their doings that her diary is one long chronicle of Brontë happenings, of visits interchanged, of Brontë births, Brontë christenings and Brontë illnesses. Later on, after his wife died, Patrick Brontë was to remember this staunch and affectionate friend, and to hope that she might be persuaded to become his second wife. Perhaps it was a pity that nothing came of it.

In the meantime at Thornton Mrs Brontë's health was deteriorating. The frequency of child-bearing probably weakened her. She had never been very strong and the cold bleak climate of Yorkshire was a trial to her after the sunny mildness of her native Cornwall. When Charlotte was four years old it was decided that the family should make another move. Mr Brontë was offered the post of permanent curate at Haworth, a higher, healthier Yorkshire village not far off. So sad farewells were said at Thornton and on an April day in 1820 seven carts, piled with the Brontë family and all their furniture and belongings, set out for Haworth.

Haworth! It is a magic word in the Brontë story. Charlotte's home for most of her days, it is bound to loom largely in the story of her life. For whatever its shortcomings it was the place she loved. In spite of all the griefs and disasters which befell her there, she looked upon it always as her home and haven. 'I am at home now,' she wrote to her friend Ellen in after years, 'and it feels like Paradise.'

It could not, however, in those days have been a very attractive place. The Parsonage, at the top left of a grey cobbled street, was a square grey house built in depressingly close proximity to the churchyard. There were, it seems, no kindly intervening walls, bushes, or trees to shut out from view the rows upon rows of closely congested tombstones. It was even rumoured that there were graves under the house. The garden was bleak, a bare scrubby patch with little growing in it but a few currant-bushes. There were stone floors inside the house and a cold stone staircase. Certainly it could not have presented a very comforting



picture to poor Maria Brontë, already ailing, when she arrived there that April day with her husband and six small children.

Anyway it is certain that from that time onward her decline was rapid and in the following year, 1821, she died. Her time on earth had been short; she was only thirty-eight, and she died of cancer.

This was the first of the Brontë tragedies. How, looking back now, can we assess the loss and adequately understand the effect of her death on all their lives?

## II

Mr Brontë was now forty-five. As a young man he had been full of zest and enterprise. He had worked and hoped for advancement in his Church career and he had also had ambitions as a writer. Now, with his wife's death, all this buoyancy vanished. Whereas formerly he had been sociable he now became a recluse and something of a hypochondriac as well. He lost heart. His courage and his exceptional intelligence remained to the end but the spirit had gone out of him. He stayed at Haworth for the rest of his life and in many ways he became a completely altered being.

With the children it was different. They were all too young to have realized their mother very much as a person. They must have understood her tenderness and her devotion to themselves, but they could not have appreciated her tact and delicacy, her humour and the charm of her personality. For the last few months of her life, too, they had been cut off from her and this lessened for them the shock of her death. During this time she had remained bedridden in her room, seeing them very little, partly because it broke her heart, and partly because she could not bear that they should see her in pain. Her last words before she died: 'Oh, God, my poor children! Oh, God, my poor children!' showed that she thought of them in anguish to the end.

It was in after years, as they grew up in that solitary home at Haworth, that her loss must have made itself felt. After her death the little Brontës were flung back almost entirely upon them-



selves. This may have been an admirable breeding-ground for their genius. It probably was. But as a preparation for life itself, it must have been crippling.

Poor Mr Brontë did his best. He was a conscientious man with a deep attachment to his family. But he was also by nature a scholar and a dreamer and there is no doubt that the more practical aspects of child-rearing preyed on his nerves. As he confided to a friend, he felt fretted by the 'innocent but distressing prattle' of his six motherless children. It was much easier and more congenial to shut himself away from them for long periods in his study, where he could read the newspapers, absorb himself in current political problems, and compose his sermons in peace. This is not to say that he was a bad or irresponsible father. Much that has been written about him has been unjust. Mrs Gaskell started the ball rolling in her famous biography of Charlotte by describing Mr Brontë in such a way as to make him appear violent, selfish and bad-tempered. She ascribed to him peculiar habits of sawing up the furniture, burning his wife's finery, and wantonly firing pistols out of windows. Poor Mr Brontë, when in his old age he read of these eccentric happenings, was both bewildered and hurt. He denied the truth of the stories which he felt must have originated from some spiteful villager, or dismissed servant, anxious to do him harm. In a dignified manner and with an exemplary courtesy he wrote to Mrs Gaskell praising her book and only suggesting in the last paragraphs of the letter that there were a few trifling mistakes which perhaps might be modified in the next edition. Writing to her again later he admitted:

I do not deny that I am somewhat eccentric. Had I been numbered among the calm, sedate, concentric men of the world I should not have been as I now am, and I should in all probability never have had such children as mine have been. I have no objection whatever to your representing me as a little eccentric, since you and other learned friends will have it so, only don't set me on in my fury to burning hearthrugs, sawing the backs off chairs, and tearing my wife's silk gowns.



Mrs Gaskell, immediately remorseful, had these obviously exaggerated stories removed from subsequent editions of her book but unfortunately some of the mud has stuck. To many people, Mr Brontë is still a monster of selfishness, the melodramatic villain of the piece. It does not occur to these critics that they might with advantage accept in rebuttal the evidence of Mr Brontë's own children. For all the children were devoted to him. He was no fierce ogre, no Mr Barrett. He may have been self-centred, hypochondriacal, and in some instances—as in the bringing up of Branwell—horribly misguided. But he was, at the same time, warm-hearted and human and well-meaning. He was proud of his clever children and he wanted to do his best for them. In after years Charlotte very seldom wrote a letter to anybody in which she did not mention her father and reveal her affection for him and her concern for his health. 'When anything ails Papa I feel too keenly that he is the *last*, the *only* near and dear relation I have in the world.' She loved him to the end and admired his good qualities.

It was clear to Mr Brontë, of course, after his wife died, that he would have to find some other woman to run the house for him, and to look after his children. The obvious choice was his wife's elder sister, Miss Elizabeth Branwell, from Penzance, who had already stayed with them in past days and who had been with Maria when she died. Miss Branwell came at once in response to her brother-in-law's call, and ensconced herself at the Parsonage. She was not used to Yorkshire and she hated the climate, but she had a great sense of duty. However uncongenial the uprooting of herself from sunny Penzance which she loved, and from the friends of a lifetime, it was an effort that she felt she owed to her dead sister, and an effort therefore which had to be made. And for this she must certainly be given credit, for it could not have been easy.

Otherwise, unfortunately, she was not quite the person one would have chosen to love and cherish the delicate Brontë children. There does not seem to have been any point of resemblance between her and the children's mother, her dead sister.



Whereas Maria had been loving, tender and gay, Miss Branwell was cold, severe and sedate. Certainly she was kind. She was by no means the ogress some people have made her out to be. But she lacked the warmth and the understanding which can be balm to the sensitive. She was not really fond of children, and between her rigid and unimaginative mind and the tempestuous colourful minds of Maria's children there could have been very little sympathy.

Perhaps even Mr Brontë himself, at any rate at the beginning, began to wilt and chafe a little under the bleak, disciplinarian rule of this not very attractive sister-in-law. At any rate, after a few months, he began to look about him feverishly for some possible alternative. The obvious solution was to marry again and this he now made every effort to do. Unfortunately, however, his efforts met with frustration and disappointment. Miss Elizabeth Firth, the good friend from Thornton and one-time Brontë chronicler, whom he first approached, had just herself become engaged to a neighbouring vicar and she therefore had to refuse him. His next attempt met with a still greater rebuff. He wrote to a Miss Mary Burder who had been his one-time sweetheart during one of his earlier curacies. His association with her at that time had come to an abrupt end, some say because of interference from her relations, some say because he jilted her. Whatever the cause of the rupture it now appeared that Miss Burder had become thoroughly soured by the encounter. She was not at all pleased or flattered by the belated renewal of Mr Brontë's suit, except for the opportunity it gave her to administer to him the stinging and snubbing refusal which she felt he deserved. Referring to the past she wrote of her 'increased gratitude and thankfulness to that wise, that indulgent, Providence which then watched over me for good and withheld me from forming in very early life an indissoluble engagement with one whom I cannot think was altogether clear of duplicity. A union with you under then existing circumstances must have embittered my future days.' In other words, in a crushing letter in which she addressed him as 'Reverend Sir', she made it quite clear to poor



Mr Brontë that she had never ceased to congratulate herself on her lucky escape in the past, and that she had no desire whatsoever to renew such a perfidious acquaintance in the future.

Mr Brontë, uncrushed—or perhaps desperate—wrote again. But it was no use. Miss Mary Burder knew her own mind and was adamant. The correspondence was closed.

After this Mr Brontë made no further efforts to re-marry. He decided, perhaps sensibly, to make the best of things as they were. His severely practical sister-in-law, with her black silk frocks, her front of auburn curls, her large caps, and the pattens she wore to protect her feet from the cold, became a permanent inhabitant of the Parsonage and remained there until her death.

### III

As incumbent of Haworth Mr Brontë received an income of £200, besides the rent-free Parsonage. It was not a great deal on which to bring up a family of six children, so the strictest economy was necessary.

A few months after Miss Branwell had installed herself at the Parsonage the disastrous attempt was made to settle the four elder Brontë girls at boarding school. By what must have seemed then a stroke of good fortune a school had lately been started in the neighbourhood, specifically intended for the daughters of impecunious clergymen. The fees were only £14 a year with, apparently, no holidays and few extras. It must have seemed like an answer to prayer to Mr Brontë, wondering how ever he was going to educate adequately his large brood of children on his small income.

The first of the family to be sent to this School for Clergy Daughters at Cowan Bridge were the two eldest girls, Maria and Elizabeth. Mr Brontë took them there himself, interviewed the principal, the Rev. W. Carus Wilson, had a meal with the scholars and staff, and appeared to be well satisfied with everything he saw. Maria and Elizabeth were delicate children and when they went to Cowan Bridge they had only just recovered



from measles and whooping-cough. But in spite of this, all seemed to go so well at the beginning that two months later Mr Brontë re-appeared, bringing with him the two next younger girls in the family, Charlotte and Emily.

Charlotte at this time was eight years old. She was a healthy child, at any rate healthy for a Brontë, and already remarkable for her intelligence. In build she was very small, with a daintiness which remained with her all her life, and which she had inherited from her mother. Her hands and feet were tiny, she had brown silky hair and large expressive eyes, but otherwise her features were irregular and too large for her small face. At school she was popular. She was remembered there afterwards as a bright hard-working child who was never in trouble with the authorities.

Poor Maria was more of a misfit. Charlotte, who always passionately championed her beloved sisters, swore in after years that Maria was the genius of the family. Certainly she seems to have had a remarkable intelligence. At home she studied with avidity all the newspapers of the day, and at the age of ten she conducted political arguments with her father on adult terms. Mr Brontë described her as having had a 'powerfully intellectual mind'. If she had lived, who knows how she might have developed, or how many more laurels might have been added to the already incredible annals of Brontë genius. But at Cowan Bridge she wilted. Her health was never good and the stern and arid discipline of the school exhausted her. She was continually in trouble with the authorities for her careless habits, her lack of method and her forgetfulness. She did not even work well. Slowly sinking, she bore all her troubles with stoic fortitude. She seems to have been a child of singular beauty of character and powers of uncomplaining endurance which bordered on the heroic. In after years she was immortalized by Charlotte as Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* and scenes such as this one seem to bear the ring of truth and the ache of memory:

Next morning, Miss Scatcherd wrote in conspicuous characters on a piece of pasteboard the word 'Slattern', and bound it like a



phylactery round Helen's large, mild, intelligent, and benign-looking forehead. She wore it till evening, patient, unresentful, regarding it as a deserved punishment. The moment Miss Scatcherd withdrew after afternoon-school, I ran to Helen, tore it off, and thrust it into the fire: the fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day, and tears, hot and large, had continually been scalding my cheek; for the spectacle of her sad resignation gave me an intolerable pain at the heart.

At length even the undiscerning school authorities were forced to realize that something was seriously wrong with Maria's health. She was now very ill indeed and Mr Brontë was sent for. He came at once and decided to take Maria home. All the girls at the school congregated in the road to watch as Mr Brontë and Maria drove away. Two or three weeks passed but Maria did not get better, and in May of that year, 1825, she died.

Maria's death was a terrible shock to Charlotte—Maria who, since their own mother's death, had tried to be a mother to them all. At home she had been a person of some importance, the eldest of the family, a little girl with an old head on her shoulders to whom one could turn for sympathy and advice. But at school everything had been different. At school only her faults were noticed; she was treated as a tiresome child, unappreciated, scolded and unhonoured. Charlotte, the younger sister, shy and silent, watched her sufferings in an agony of sympathy. And when Maria went home and died so swiftly and tragically, Charlotte was stunned.

But worse was to come. Hardly was the funeral over when Elizabeth too was taken ill. She was sent home at once in the care of a woman member of the staff. Mr Brontë, when he saw the state she was in, rushed to Cowan Bridge the next day and fetched home Charlotte and Emily. A fortnight later Elizabeth died.

That was the end of Cowan Bridge School as far as the Brontës were concerned. Charlotte and Emily never returned there. Maria and Elizabeth had both died of tuberculosis, and whether their deaths were entirely due to the harsh, unhealthy conditions at the school it is difficult now to say. Charlotte, in after years,



blamed the school entirely. Certainly the school life was rigorous. The building itself was unsuitable. The greater part consisted of a disused bobbin-mill; all the rooms were paved with stone and there were low ceilings and small windows. The site was low-lying and not very healthy. Spartan habits were encouraged in all the children and there was little comfort. On Sundays they had a two-mile walk to church and took their dinners with them, which they ate in a cold, disused room after the service. There was then another long service to attend in the afternoon, to be followed by the two-mile walk back to the school in the evening. Charlotte describes it in *Jane Eyre*:

We returned by an exposed and hilly road, where the bitter winter wind, blowing over a range of snowy summits to the north, almost flayed the skin from our faces. . . . How we longed for the light and heat of a blazing fire when we got back! But, to the little ones at least, this was denied: each hearth in the school-room was immediately surrounded by a double row of great girls, and behind them the younger children crouched in groups, wrapping their starved arms in their pinafores. A little solace came at tea-time, in the shape of a double ration of bread—a whole, instead of a half, slice—with the delicious addition of a thin scrape of butter.

The principal, the Rev. Carus Wilson, had started the school for the children of poor clergymen, ostensibly as a charitable concern; but perhaps he was not the right man for such an undertaking. He preyed on the children's minds and imaginations with his unctuous talks of wickedness and hell fire and eternal damnation. Though some of the staff were kindly, and perhaps they all meant well, it must have been a bleak life for any children who were delicate and sensitive.

There is no doubt anyway that this experience at Cowan Bridge had a profound and indelible effect on Charlotte. In later years, when she talked of the sufferings of Maria and Elizabeth, she broke down and wept. She castigated the school mercilessly in her conversations with Mrs Gaskell, so that Mrs Gaskell, later writing Charlotte's biography and describing the school as Charlotte had painted it, found herself in trouble for libel. And



Charlotte herself has immortalized the school for all time in the early pages of *Jane Eyre*.

What was the truth? It is one of the Brontë mysteries, one of several, to which we shall never now know the answer. The Rev. W. Carus Wilson has his defenders. Charlotte may have exaggerated. The vicarious sufferings which she endured on behalf of her sisters may have clouded her eyes so that she could see everything only in the darkest colours. But her indignation was human; one can but sympathize with her. As she wrote years afterwards to her publisher friend, Mr Williams, in an effort perhaps to take a sane objective view of this tragic period of her life: 'My career was a very quiet one. I was plodding and industrious, perhaps I was very grave, for I suffered to see my sisters perishing.'

#### IV

There were now four Brontë children left—Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne. For the next few years no further attempt was made to send them to boarding school. Even the one son, Branwell, after attending Haworth Grammar School for only a short time, was educated at home.

It was a strange unchildlike life that they led. Charlotte was now the eldest of the family—she had stepped into Maria's shoes—and she took her position very seriously. She dominated the others and they all looked up to her. She had a strong will, an insatiable thirst for learning, and an uncrushable ambition. Her sisters and brother were her charge, she loved them with a flaming devotion, and she was determined that they should all get on in the world.

Circumstances, of course, were very much against them. There was little opportunity for culture in the village of Haworth and its surroundings. They had no friends of their own class and, as their father's family lived in Ireland, and their mother's family were far away in Cornwall, they had no relations either, living near, to take an interest in their development. It was an appallingly isolated existence for children of such brilliant intelligence. The only grown-ups with whom they had any close contact were their



father, their Aunt Branwell, and Tabitha Aykroyd, or 'Tabby', their old Yorkshire servant. These three people naturally all had a certain amount of influence on their young lives at this time. But it was largely by their own efforts, by their own zeal and ambition, by their unceasing energy, and Charlotte's amazing driving force, that they developed their brilliant gifts of intellect and imagination. With miraculous courage and persistence, they set about the lonely business of self-education and eventually made themselves into writers.

In spite of this undercurrent of creative effort life at Haworth Parsonage appeared, on the surface, uneventful. It was not a large house and, as all the inmates were people of strong individuality, their days needed to be carefully organized, so that they did not get in one another's way. There were two sitting-rooms downstairs, one on either side of the front door. The room on the right as one enters the house was given over entirely to Mr Brontë and was known as the parlour. The room on the left, though used for meals, was really the children's sitting-room. At the back on the ground floor was a kitchen, and another very tiny room where peat was stored. The two best front bedrooms were occupied by Mr Brontë and Aunt Branwell. There was a tiny little box-room between these two where some of the children slept, and where they often sat to do their writing. At the back were two more bedrooms, one for the servant, and one which was later turned into a studio for Branwell.

The house, then, was fully occupied and in these rather cramped quarters noisy children would have certainly made their presence felt. But—at any rate, after the baby stage—the Brontë children were never noisy. It is a strange thing but one has never heard of any kind of active game, indoor or outdoor, as being part of their lives. They never played hide-and-seek, or rounders, or card games like other children. They did not even read children's books. One cannot imagine the equivalents of Beatrix Potter, or Enid Blyton or Angela Brazil in the Brontë household. There were no Winnie-the-Poohs, no picture-books, no fairy stories. Yet they were all insatiable readers. But from the beginning they read as



grown-up people. Their gods were Scott and Shakespeare and Homer. For fantasy they preferred *The Arabian Nights* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. And, by way of variety, they read their aunt's Methodist magazines, which in those days were full of blood-curdling stories of miracles, apparitions and nightmares—frenzied fanaticism which came as welcome grist to the mill of the Brontë imaginations, already working overtime.

An unchildlike life, indeed. Reading and writing. Writing and reading. Or, when they were driven out of doors, walking on the moors.

Any orthodox education that the Brontë girls had at this time came from their aunt, Miss Branwell, and from their father. Mr Brontë also taught his son. Their day was very uniform. The family met every morning for breakfast in the dining-room and this, except for tea, was the only meal at which they did all meet during the day; for Mr Brontë, already suffering from dyspepsia, preferred to eat his other meals in solitary seclusion in the parlour. At breakfast, however, which consisted usually of porridge, he seems to have been in a good humour. By no means the taciturn man he has sometimes been made out to be, he could prove himself both lively and talkative. He had a good memory for Celtic tales of his old home and local tales of the Yorkshire dales, and he liked to give his Irish imagination full rein. One can well imagine his four impressionable children listening, rapt and spellbound, to the stories he had to tell them.

After breakfast came the lesson hours. The three girls joined Miss Branwell in her bedroom and she gave them some form of simple instruction on various subjects and taught them, more particularly, the arts of sewing and domestic work. This accomplished, she felt, no doubt, that her duty was done for the day. For the remaining hours until bedtime, except to appear at meals, she remained upstairs in her bedroom. Mr Brontë by now was entrenched behind the closed door of his study. For the remainder of the day the children were left to their own devices.

It does not seem that they were unhappy. Perhaps it never dawned on them that their lives were in any way different from



the lives of other children. They must have regretted that they were motherless, but they had been so young when their mother died, that by now they had almost forgotten her. They were quite satisfied with their home, with its bare garden and the dreary outlook over the cemetery. They loved their father and they esteemed their aunt. They were good children, giving little trouble, and they were apparently not irked by the uneventful routine of their lives. If they were starved of affection they did not know it. They had each other and they had various pets; they were all fond of dogs, and kittens and birds. And when they felt a longing for adult companionship there was always Tabby in the kitchen, so away they would troop to the kitchen to talk to Tabby.

Tabitha Aykroyd, or Tabby, when she first came to the Parsonage, soon after the Cowan Bridge episode, was already over fifty; and the rest of her life, with only a few short breaks, was spent with the Brontës. She lived to the age of eighty-four and her death took place only a month or so before Charlotte's. She was a kind, downright, warm-hearted old Yorkshire country-woman. She loved the children and they loved her. Although she had at times a sharp tongue she could, too, be comforting and motherly. She cosseted them, and rebuked them, and told them stories. They loved to sit round her in the kitchen and hear her wild outlandish tales of local happenings: the crimes, sins and love dramas of their neighbours in the lonely houses on the moors. A good deal of the children's time, in fact, was spent in the kitchen, listening to Tabby. Her kind heart and rough ways gave them a feeling of stability and security. She was more lowly, more 'down to earth' than their father and their aunt. More accessible too. She did not follow the custom of Mr Brontë and Aunt Branwell, and ensconce herself behind closed doors.

## V

Charlotte by this time had recovered, as far as she was ever to recover, from that first paralysing shock of Maria's and Elizabeth's



deaths. Children are notably resilient and it is not in their natures to dwell overmuch on what has happened in the past. But Charlotte, of course, was no ordinary child, and from an early age her capacity for feeling was intense. She could not forget Maria and Elizabeth entirely; their tragic end had left in her mind a permanent and deep-seated anguish which affected her spirits for the rest of her life. It is necessary to realize this to come to a true understanding of Charlotte. It accounts partly for the morbid introspectiveness and the sometimes bitter feelings of her later years: for her shyness, her lack of social confidence, her censoriousness, her fear of life's rebuffs, her disbelief in personal happiness. This early grief, the bitterness of this early loss, shook the world under her feet, and undermined the foundations of all her trust.

But she would never admit defeat. She had a miraculous courage. It manifested itself then at the age of nine as it manifested itself throughout her life. After each fresh shock she would pick herself up, stunned and staggering, and start the battle afresh. In spite of her frailty she was a stoic. Her capacity for feeling, for suffering, almost wrecked her, but over and over again she refused to be wrecked. Her life, as one of her biographers, Clement Shorter, has said, is amongst the saddest in literature. But in admitting this one must also glory in her triumph over disaster, her unquenchable spirit which remained with her to the end.

Fortunately in those early childhood days she could not yet know of the terrible future griefs which life still held in store for her. Although the beloved elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, were dead, she still had two sisters and a brother left to her. These three, although they had the same interests, were very different from one another in character. Emily, the most difficult of all the Brontës to understand, was the tallest of the family, a graceful, shy girl with beautiful eyes, a complexion without much colour and naturally silky hair. Her reserve and unusual inner self-sufficiency gave her an air of chilling aloofness which unfairly belied the humanitarianism of her nature and the depths of her feeling. Anne, in contrast, was feminine, gentle, mild, docile. She was the prettiest of the three with light-brown curly hair and a clear transparent



skin. She too, however, was by nature shy and silent, and given to melancholy. The member of the family who was nearest in age to Charlotte and for whom at this time she had the deepest affection, was her brother Branwell.

Branwell, strange to say, was everything that his sisters were not. Where they were shy he was gregarious, where they were quiet he was lively, where they were stiff he was charming. He was bright and brilliant and amusing and they all, even the cold Aunt Branwell, adored him. He was, in fact, in those early days, the hope of the family. In appearance he was on the small side, with sharp handsome features, a pointed nose, weak mouth and red hair. He was very ambitious and he was determined to become famous. After his death Mr Brontë spoke often of his 'brilliant and unhappy son'. But it was an ironic feature of the tragic Brontë story that Branwell's father should have realized so little how much he himself was probably to blame for the pitifully wasted life of his only son.

The unfortunate boy was never given a proper education. If he went to the Haworth Grammar School it was only for a very short time and, after that, his father gave him lessons at home. He had no chance of mixing with other boys of his class and intelligence, no competitive element in his education, no opportunity for making suitable friends. He was fond of his sisters and joined with them in all their artistic activities; but as they grew older the girls had domestic duties in the house to attend to—Emily helped with the cooking, Charlotte did regular hours of housework—but he, being a boy, was excused these domesticities. There must have been many hours when he was bored to tears and when time hung heavily on his hands. Whenever possible, and disobeying his father's implicit instructions, he began to play truant in the town, making friends with village boys, and even visiting the 'Black Bull' at the top of the hill where he was very popular. He told stories, and he made people laugh, and he was famous for his wit and charm. In return he received the flattery and praise which, to anyone of his volatile and friendly temperament, was meat and drink, and balm to the spirit. He could feel, among this admiring



audience, that he was a spectacular and exceptional person with a brilliant future before him. He could still believe in himself. The corrosion of his cramped, inhibited life at the Parsonage would be momentarily arrested, temporarily forgotten.

To Charlotte, he was in those days a hero. The nearest in age to her in the family, he was her special friend and ally. All her life Charlotte's affections were concentrated and intense and all her life she searched eagerly and passionately for the one perfect relationship which would satisfy her deepest and most ardent longings. In Branwell, it seemed at first that she had found this perfect companionship, this affinity.

They had so much in common. Like her, he revered with a deep and passionate ardour the things of the mind. Like her, he was drunkenly ambitious. But whereas she, more unselfishly, worked and planned for the emancipation of the entire family, he worked and planned, entirely and concentratedly, for himself. His temperament, even at this time, was unstable. Besides admiration he should have had firmness, the enlightened understanding of some older person, a helping, guiding hand. And it was here that his father for some inexplicable reason failed him. Although Mr Brontë himself at one time had been a victim of the selfsame ambitions—the longing for education, for artistic achievement, even for fame—and with these ends in mind had raised himself from the rut, got himself to Cambridge, mixed with people of his own intellectual attainments, broadened his horizons, he did not help Branwell to achieve the same advantages which he had managed to gain for himself. Was his inability to help his son due to mistaken devotion, slackness, selfishness, a lack of funds? Nobody knows. Whatever the reasons the results were disastrous. With his life narrowed to the four walls of Haworth Parsonage, all the artistic and intellectual promise of Branwell's youth was gradually dissipated away, blown to the winds. Gradually he was undermined. He had not the strength of character of his sisters, their stoic endurance to withstand frustration and monotony and disappointment. And in the end even Charlotte, with her passionate admiration of his talents, was powerless to save him.



## VI

The six years after the tragedy of Cowan Bridge, with all the children now living at home, passed without further mishap. They were, however, six very important years in the children's development.

Looking back now, one wonders sometimes how much the unhealthy conditions of this early environment were to blame for the wretched health of the family in later years. Haworth Parsonage was a cold, damp dwelling-house, hemmed in on two sides by tombstones. It faced east and was exposed to all the winds of heaven, sweeping down from the moors. All the floors were of stone and only two of the rooms were properly carpeted. There were no curtains to the windows, as Mr Brontë had a fixed and rather morbid dread of fire. Sanitary arrangements were inadequate and water was obtained from a pump in the kitchen. There seems little doubt that the water-supply was far from pure. In 1847 apparently Mr Brontë had the well cleaned and wrote in his diary: 'The water was tinged yellow by eight tin cans in a state of decomposition.' In 1850 the inhabitants of Haworth village—a village where the average age at death had recently been 25·8 years—were still petitioning for a pure and wholesome water-supply. Some of the rooms at the Parsonage, no doubt, could be adequately warmed, but the little room over the hall which the children used as a study faced east and had no fireplace. In dimensions it was nine feet by something under six feet. Here the children sat for hours on end, cooped together, probably with the window tight shut for warmth, doing their writing.

Were the seeds of tuberculosis, from which they all suffered, sown by these spartan, comfortless conditions? And did the Brontë children, too, in those days have enough to eat? Breakfast consisted of porridge. For lunch they had meat and a milk pudding—though it was rumoured by some that the meat was often replaced solely by potatoes. There was not much butter and there seems to have been a shortage of fruit and green vegetables. Nobody apparently cultivated the garden.



At this time, however, the children seem to have kept reasonably well. Maria had died of tuberculosis—and Elizabeth had rapidly followed suit. But we do not hear much of any illness during the years that followed. In these years, however much the Brontë children may have been undermined physically, mentally their energy was remarkable. With inexhaustible gusto they read, wrote and studied. All the family had a passion for politics and they all read several newspapers regularly, both Tory and Whig. Mr Brontë was an ardent Tory and his children followed in his footsteps. Even the cold and aloof Aunt Branwell joined in the fray and conducted spirited arguments with her brother-in-law. Though the children's bodies may have been neglected, their brains prospered under this régime. Their father talked to them as though they were grown-up people. They joined him for breakfast every day in the parlour, and he joined them for tea in the dining-room. When he was not telling them the blood-curdling stories which so inflamed their imaginations, he was discussing with them, in an atmosphere of mutual excitement, the most stirring political events of the day.

Charlotte, always a hero-worshipper, adored the Duke of Wellington. Wellington, now in his later years, was at this period a national figure of tremendous importance and in Charlotte's eyes he could do no wrong. Sometimes this led to arguments with her brother and sisters who would put forward the rival claims of Hannibal, Napoleon or Caesar. If the disputes became too heated Mr Brontë had to act as arbitrator. It was about this time that Mr Brontë brought home as a present to Branwell the box of twelve wooden soldiers from Leeds. Charlotte seized one of the soldiers at once. 'This', she cried, 'is the Duke of Wellington! This shall be the Duke!' And from this beginning there started that extraordinary game of the secret kingdom, eventually known as 'Angria', which became the chief preoccupation of herself and Branwell for many years to come.

It was, to all intents and purposes, another world, an escapist world, an imaginary kingdom in Africa, which together they invented. They peopled it with all sorts of figures, some figures





Haworth Parsonage at  
the time of the Brontës



Haworth's steep main  
street





The Rev. Patrick Brontë



Patrick Branwell Brontë. A medallion by Leyland

from real life, some imaginary—all added by degrees to the first original inhabitants, the twelve wooden soldiers. The inmates of this kingdom had their own newspapers, their own books and magazines. These were produced carefully and painstakingly by Charlotte and Branwell in tiny little editions, two inches by one, with minute handwritten contents proportionate to the size of the soldiers. All the doings, the adventures, the love dramas of the inhabitants of the kingdom were recounted in these tiny volumes. Over one hundred of them still exist, carefully bound and stitched. They are the result of an immense labour, a wonderful singleness of purpose in two children, both so young. Charlotte, who was always so short-sighted, must have had to bend her head closer, and ever closer, over the paper to produce this microscopic writing, now only readable through a magnifying glass. She probably impaired her eyesight irretrievably. But her enthusiasm never wavered. Emily and Anne were soon inspired to do likewise; their 'Gondal' kingdom became a rival to Angria. They, too, spent their time writing, writing. And when their materials gave out, the children would hurry off to the village shop to buy more paper, and yet more paper.

In time these fantasies of their invention became more real to them than real life. It was not that their real life was unhappy, it was just that it was colourless. Nothing really exciting and eventful ever happened at the Parsonage. Their vivid imaginations clamoured for drama, for adventure, for romance. How very satisfactory, then, that they should supply these missing elements for themselves in the written annals of their secret kingdoms. Charlotte supplied the love interest, Branwell—who had a taste for the macabre and the horrible—confined his attention chiefly to bloody battles and other scenes of violence. For both the children, and for Emily and Anne, too, with their Gondal dramas, it was a sort of wish-fulfilment, an intense and passionate day-dream. It brought them a great deal of thrilling occupation, of absorbing pleasure. The only snag about it was that it unfitted them completely for reality and for their future life as adults in a harsh and difficult world.



## CHAPTER II

# *Charlotte and Ellen Nussey*

Ere long I hope once more to have the pleasure of seeing *almost* the *only* and certainly the *dearest* friend I possess.

CHARLOTTE TO ELLEN

### I

**I**N 1831, when Charlotte was fifteen, it was decided that she must again go to school. This was an important and necessary decision. There was the future to think of. Mr Brontë's salary was the family's only means of support. If he should die, or if his health should break down, what would happen to his three daughters if they had been given no chance of learning to support themselves?

The proposed plan was that Charlotte, the eldest, should go for a year or two to a really high-class school, where she was to make good use of her time, and learn as much as she possibly could. She would then return home as teacher and impart all this knowledge to her sisters. The three girls would by this means be equipped to go out into the world and to earn their living as governesses.

In comparison to their day-dreams, to the Gondal and Angrian lives of romance and adventure, it is easy to realize how drab and uninspiring this future must have appeared. To Charlotte especially, on whom the main burden fell, and who had suffered so unforgettably in those earlier years at school, the immediate prospects must have seemed not only drab but frightening.

She was terribly shy. She knew nothing about other girls—for years her sisters had been her only friends. Away from Haworth she was prostrated by homesickness. She was lacking in self-confidence, and small, and plain. Even her education—or lack of it—must have caused her many qualms of doubt. Her father and aunt had taught her all they could, but they were not



qualified teachers, and there were many subjects on which she was woefully ignorant. When she went to school she would be parted from her beloved Branwell, from their partnership in writing, and all the magic consolation of their dream world. She would be completely alone, dependent only on herself. She could not have failed, in these circumstances of uncertainty and loss, to be both apprehensive and fearful.

It was only her fortitude on this occasion, as in so many other moments of crisis in her life, that carried her through. In spite of her romantic temperament she had, too, a great deal of common sense. She could see for herself that she was doing the right thing. Knowledge was what she wanted. Knowledge must be acquired at all costs. She must make her future secure—and not only her own future, but the future of her sisters as well. However much she suffered in the process nothing that helped to achieve this end must be left undone.

And so it came about that on a cold winter day in January 1831, Charlotte set out all by herself in a covered cart to travel the twenty odd miles that took her from Haworth to Miss Margaret Wooller's school at Roe Head, near Huddersfield.

It must be admitted at once that this was a happy choice. If Charlotte had to go to school, then a more pleasant one could not have been found. It was in many ways more like a country home than an educational establishment. There were only eight or ten pupils, the building was a private house with a pleasant garden, a sweeping drive and magnificent views, and Miss Wooller was a kind and gracious woman with a fund of sympathy and an understanding heart. It was at this school that Charlotte was to make three important and lifelong friends, one of the three Miss Wooller herself.

Even amongst the kindest people, however, it takes time to make friends and on that first evening of her arrival Charlotte felt lost, lonely and miserable. She stood by the schoolroom window, in her old-fashioned unbecoming green dress, with her soft hair screwed up in tight tortured curls, and gazed out at the unfamiliar scene, while the tears coursed slowly down her pale



cheeks. The other girls had watched her arrival with interest. In after years they described their first impressions. They noticed her shyness, her nervousness. They thought how small she was, how thin and sallow-faced. She seemed very short-sighted, peering about her like a little old woman, and when she spoke it was with a pronounced Irish accent. Nobody thought her pretty. On the contrary one at least of the girls, Mary Taylor, decided that she was very ugly and later, unnecessarily, told her so. There was something rather laughable about her, they thought. Her clothes were so old-fashioned, and her large features matched so oddly with her extreme smallness. She seemed so ill at ease, so unused to school life. They had never seen anybody quite like her before.

It was Ellen Nussey, afterwards Charlotte's confidante and the most important woman friend of her life, who made the first approaches. Ellen was a new girl, too. She had a fellow-feeling for Charlotte, standing so forlornly in tears by the window. She spoke to her, and tried to offer consolation. Charlotte confessed in after years that, in spite of the proffered comfort, she did not altogether take to Ellen at first. Probably nothing, or nobody, could have helped her that first night. In the battle with her own nerves, and her homesickness, she had to rely entirely on herself.

Fortunately this extreme of misery did not last. In spite of her shyness Charlotte was a sociable being. She was amiable and anxious to please and she wanted people to like her. But above all she was thankful to have this chance to educate herself, to pursue the learning and culture which meant so much to her. With regard to her position in the school Miss Wooler at first was in something of a quandary. She realized at once that Charlotte's intelligence was above the average, but she also saw that there were branches of knowledge of which she was almost totally ignorant. It was true that she excelled at literature, general knowledge, drawing. But she had no conventional grounding; she knew little grammar, scarcely any geography. Miss Wooler tentatively suggested that she should be put in the second class among the younger girls, but Charlotte was so upset by this



suggestion that eventually Miss Wooler relented and put her in the top class.

Her confidence was justified. Charlotte worked conscientiously and with unwearying energy to catch up. At her own subjects she was brilliant—so much so, that the other girls, who had at first been inclined to look on her with some amusement, now began to observe her with respect. They were astounded by her knowledge of poetry: she could recite almost any poem by heart and could immediately name its author. She had made a study of human nature through the books she had read, and her judgments on public men and affairs were wise and sensible. She followed all the activities of Parliament with extraordinary zeal and could name all the members of the Government. She had, so she told the other girls, studied politics since she was five years old. She still adored the Duke of Wellington and sang his praises at every possible opportunity. By way of contrast she had a passion for drawing, and at this too she excelled. Her passionate intensity of temperament made everything that she did, and learned, of vivid, pulsating importance to her.

It was only on the physical side of school life that she was at a disadvantage. Here her smallness, frailness, and extreme short sight were great handicaps. And, besides this, she had never in her life played any games. She did not know how to play games, and her physical feebleness made her disinclined to try. So while the other girls played their ball games in the school grounds, she stood about under the trees and made no attempt to join them.

## II

Besides the kind and motherly Miss Wooler Charlotte made two other life-long friends at Roe Head School: Ellen Nussey, who had spoken kindly to her on that first dreadful homesick evening of her arrival, and Mary Taylor. Ellen Nussey was the more important of these, perhaps partly because in after years Ellen lived all her life in Yorkshire, whereas at an early age Mary Taylor emigrated to New Zealand.



In character the two friends seem to have been dissimilar. Ellen was kind, placid, conventional, rather ordinary, pious and staunch. Mary, more of a firebrand, was independent, sometimes aggressive, energetic, unconventional and adventurous. Ellen was the more sympathetic of the two. She was a pretty girl with soft, amiable features, a bright expression, and hair falling becomingly from a centre parting in curls on either side of her face. She had an open and friendly nature and was good at drawing people out. It was not long before Charlotte had told her many stories of her life at Haworth, of her family, and—more particularly—of her unforgotten grief for the two dead sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, who had died so tragically and so young. This, always, was an obsession with Charlotte. She still dreamed about her sisters, she could not get them out of her mind and nerves. And when in her dreams they were different, no longer the loving sisters she remembered but cold and hostile and unfriendly, it nearly broke her heart.

Ellen was a good friend for Charlotte. The youngest child of twelve, she had had some experience of family life herself. Her father had died when she was nine, leaving her mother badly off, and her childhood had not been altogether happy. When she arrived at Roe Head School she was fourteen. Like Charlotte, she took life seriously, but accepted it more calmly. She was placid, sensible, reliable. She had an even temperament and was not given to extremes of feeling. At first sight it might seem that she and Charlotte had not really very much in common. From the intellectual point of view certainly they had nothing in common at all. But Charlotte set great value on Ellen's friendship. Writing to Mrs Gaskell towards the end of her life she speaks of the relief which Ellen's quiet society brought to her, of the 'support and repose for which I cannot be too thankful'. She writes of Ellen's kindness and goodness and of her steady affection. And Ellen said of Charlotte: 'She told me things she never told anyone else. And I had her heart.'

This relationship was to go through many stages before it settled down to the calm, stable affection of these later years. At



first, at Roe Head School, it was just an ordinary schoolgirl friendship, with Charlotte gradually gaining the ascendant and imparting worldly wisdom and intellectual counsel. Mary, Ellen and Charlotte were the three top girls in the school, but of the three it was Ellen who was the least intellectually brilliant. Mary was clever in her way. She was self-willed, with advanced ideas of feminine emancipation, and in after years she became a writer of books herself. She could appreciate Charlotte's spark, her genius, the vivid imagination which burned and smouldered beneath the shy, conventional, almost puritanical exterior of the minister's daughter from Haworth.

The fifteen months or so which Charlotte spent at Roe Head were a peaceful period in her life and she was not unhappy. It was a friendly school, with no rigorously set hours for lessons, and Miss Wooler understood her from the first. Charlotte missed Haworth, of course, and her beloved brother and sisters. She wrote home frequently, chiefly to Branwell because, as she said to him, 'to you I find the most to say'. Branwell, at home, still conducted the sagas of Angria and wrote to tell the always interested Charlotte of the latest affairs and events of that fantastic country. Charlotte was his favourite sister and, now that she was away from home, he was more at a loose end than ever. On one occasion he walked the whole of the twenty miles from Haworth to Roe Head and back again—forty miles in a day—in order to see her. Charlotte was touched by this devotion. She wrote to him afterwards: 'I feel exceedingly anxious to know how and in what state you arrived home after your long and (I should think) very fatiguing journey. I could perceive when you arrived at Roe Head that you were very much tired, though you refused to acknowledge it.'

However, they were not to be separated much longer. In 1832 it was decided that Charlotte's school-days were over, and the time had now come for her to return home and teach her sisters what she herself had learned. Miss Wooler was sorry to lose her, and she had by this time become a favourite with her schoolfellows. They had found her good-tempered and always



willing to try to do what they wanted. Particularly they appreciated her vivid powers of story-telling. Some of these stories of Charlotte's in fact, told at night in the dormitory, had been so macabre and imaginatively compelling that her listeners had had hysterics, and Miss Wooler had had to come to the rescue.

However, Miss Wooler was no mean story-teller herself so perhaps she forgave Charlotte. She herself was capable of rousing the girls' imaginations with her exciting tales of the industrial riots of that age. She told of how she had lain awake at night listening to the drilling outside of thousands of despairing men, arming themselves for revolt. Charlotte drank in avidly all the colourful details of these stories of poor and wretched factory workers and their rebellion against machines, of besieged mills and murdered mill-owners. On their walks Miss Wooler took the girls to visit the scenes of these Luddite risings. They saw for themselves the factories gradually spreading their tentacles over the green countryside, the aristocratic manor-houses falling into neglect and disrepair. Later it all provided copy and first-hand description for Charlotte when she came to write her third book *Shirley*. Nothing was wasted on her. Her imagination was like blotting-paper, soaking everything in, absorbing all and rejecting nothing.

Back at home at Haworth after leaving Roe Head, life soon settled again into an even monotony. Charlotte, embarking on that revealing correspondence with Ellen which was to last the rest of her life, gave Ellen a chapter-and-verse account of her day: 'In the morning from nine o'clock till half-past twelve, I instruct my sisters and draw; then we walk till dinner-time. After dinner I sew till tea-time, and after tea I either write, read, or do a little fancy-work, or draw, as I please.'

For the next three years Charlotte's life, apart from an exchange of visits with Ellen, varied very little from this mapped out programme. There were no congenial social contacts to be had in the neighbourhood and it was only very, very rarely that Charlotte



went out to tea. Occasionally all the female Sunday-school teachers of the district met for tea at the Parsonage and this was quite an event. Otherwise there was no excitement of any sort, little to relieve the monotony. It might have seemed a dull existence, Charlotte herself admitted that it was monotonous, but she added also that it was 'delightful'. For, after all, was she not back at her beloved Haworth? Back, too, with her beloved sisters and brother whose society never palled on her, whose minds worked in the same way as her own, and who shared all her interests. They enjoyed their walks on the moors, happy only to be together. Emily and Anne, and Charlotte herself, were so shy that they shunned even familiar faces and, except to buy paper, they seldom went down the hill into the village. One of their great interests was, of course, reading. Mr Brontë, who owned many books, encouraged them in this and they also got books from the library in Keighley. Their lives were brightened, too, by their artistic activities. Besides their writing they had now all developed Charlotte's intense interest in drawing. Branwell, particularly, seemed to show great promise and Mr Brontë, impressed, did his best to help them by engaging a Mr William Robinson to come and give them lessons at a cost of two guineas a visit. The lessons went swimmingly for a time but not for long. Unfortunately Mr Robinson seems to have behaved in some way that was indecorous for drawing masters and he left abruptly, and under a cloud, the exact nature of the cloud not having been revealed to us.

This must have been a disappointment to Charlotte. She now had great hopes that she and her brother and sisters might one day all earn their livings by the practice of art. This would be so much more congenial than going out as school-teachers or governesses, a prospect which she dreaded. They must either try to succeed as artists or else as writers. . . . She and Branwell, thankful to be once more united, eagerly returned to recounting the chronicles of Angria, and the pile of little volumes steadily mounted.



## III

It is odd that Charlotte, who loved Ellen so much, never made Ellen her confidante over her literary ambitions. Even years later, when Charlotte was writing *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*, she revealed nothing of these activities to Ellen. It is recorded that she sat at Ellen's table on a visit, correcting the proofs of *Jane Eyre*, without making any effort to explain her occupation.

Such reticence among lady authors was the fashion of the day but, in Charlotte's case, it must also, one imagines, have been largely due to Ellen's intellectual limitations. Ellen was an excellent friend but she was not literary. One just had to accept that indisputable fact and Charlotte accepted it. Writing of Ellen in after years Charlotte said: 'She is without romance. If she attempts to read poetry, or poetic prose, aloud, I am irritated and deprive her of the book—if she talks of it, I stop my ears; but she is good; she is true; she is faithful, and I love her.'

It was this love for Ellen which buoyed Charlotte up during the next few years. She was still devoted to Branwell, but Branwell was only a boy, with a boy's understanding, and perhaps at this time in her life it was feminine sympathy and understanding that she needed. She corresponded as well with Mary Taylor but it was to Ellen chiefly that she addressed her letters. At first these letters were rather formal, reserved, written in a very stilted, almost pompous style. This was the fashion of the period and one must also remember that Charlotte had been brought up to conceal her feelings whenever possible. By clothing her thoughts in pompous language she could dissemble her intensity of emotion, give an appearance of coolness, of poise. But gradually, as time went on, she thawed. The letters grew more natural, more heartfelt, less guarded. Ellen became a kind of safety-valve and Charlotte poured out all her passing thoughts, her fears and her difficulties. In return she absorbed herself in Ellen's affairs, took a passionate interest in her life, tried to advise and counsel her in all her problems. Charlotte was very humble. She was filled with gratitude for Ellen's friendship and found it difficult to believe that it would



last. Occasionally in these letters, the force of her emotional feeling breaks out in little spontaneous bursts of affection: 'Ere long I hope once more to have the pleasure of seeing *almost* the *only* and certainly the *dearest* friend I possess', 'Farewell, my *dear, dear, dear* Ellen', 'Adieu, my sweetest Ellen, I am ever yours'.

There was an exchange of visits, too, which must have brought happiness to Charlotte. Her own visit to Ellen in September 1832 was marred by her shyness, but Ellen's return visit during the following year was highly successful. Ellen was an adaptable, friendly girl and everyone at the Parsonage was impressed by her kind heart, her pretty face and her gentle, pious outlook on life. In a letter soon after her departure Charlotte wrote: 'Were I to tell you of the impression you have made on everyone here, you would accuse me of flattery. Papa and Aunt are continually adducing you as an example for me to shape my actions and behaviour by. Emily and Anne say "they never saw anyone they liked so well as Miss Nussey", and Tabby talks a great deal more nonsense about you than I choose to report.'

Ellen, in her turn, was much impressed by the Brontës. She thought them all highly intelligent, very original, and altogether different from any family she had ever known. Knowing the Brontës was the supreme experience of Ellen's life. Mr Brontë, she decided, was a most exceptional man with his venerable air, his courtly manners, his snow-white hair, his high collar and great cravat, and his tall upright figure. She liked Charlotte's brother and sisters. They were figures of great fascination for her. Emily, of course, was the enigma. There was little enlightening that she could tell us about Emily except to describe her tall graceful figure, the beautiful unusual eyes which so seldom looked you in the face, the air of extreme reserve, the sallow complexion and tightly frizzed hair. Emily and Anne were devoted to one another, inseparable, almost like twins. Anne, it seems, was the prettier of the two. Anne was soft and gentle, her hair curled naturally, and her eyes were violet blue. Branwell had 'tawny' hair. He was the best looking of the Brontës.

Ellen went for walks with Charlotte and her sisters on their



beloved moors. She was surprised to find that when they got out on to the moors, away from civilization, the Brontë girls shed some of their gaucherie and reserve and became lively and animated. Emily particularly became a different person, splashing in the streams, laughing, and picking the wild heather. The four girls went for long rambles, they called themselves 'the quartette', and it seems that the Brontë girls accepted Ellen as one of themselves.

At home in the Parsonage Mr Brontë and Aunt Branwell also did their best to make her visit a pleasant one. In spite of the discomforts of the house, the curtainless windows and uncarpeted stone floors, the damp draughty passages, Ellen enjoyed her stay at Haworth. She listened politely to Aunt Branwell's nostalgic but animated tales of Penzance life and to Mr Brontë's weird Celtic stories. Mr Brontë's health, she noticed, gave cause for concern; he was considered to be something of an invalid. Miss Branwell read aloud to him in the afternoons and he went to bed early. At eight o'clock in the evening the household met for prayers, and by nine Mr Brontë had locked the front door and was on his way upstairs. He would pause at the dining-room door to call good-night to the children, and to tell them not to be late for bed. Then, half-way up the stairs, he would stop to wind the grandfather clock. In the mornings Ellen heard him firing a pistol from his bedroom window—a habit which to outsiders was somewhat startling. It was not, however, quite so wildly eccentric as Mrs Gaskell was afterwards led to suppose, but was the result of Mr Brontë's fear of industrial rioters. He thought it wise to keep a loaded pistol handy at night, and in the morning he fired it out of the window to make sure it was functioning properly. Perhaps too—as is highly probable—he fancied himself as a shot.

After Ellen's visit was over everything at the Parsonage went on much as usual. The children were ceaselessly active. All of them, except Charlotte, were musical and all of them now, except Charlotte, were given piano lessons. Besides playing the piano Branwell, the ever versatile, played the organ and the flute. After the default of William Robinson, the art master, Branwell was the



only member of the family, too, who still carried on seriously with his efforts at drawing and painting. Charlotte, who had spent months in a detailed copying of engravings, had still further wrecked her eyesight and now had to give it up. At this branch of art Emily and Anne had never really shown very much talent and finally they, too, abandoned their efforts. Poor Charlotte was crestfallen. Her hopes and plans that they should all earn their livings as artists instead of as governesses were going sadly awry. The future was still uncertain, beset with problems. They could not stay at home for ever; soon they would have to think seriously about earning some money. It might be worth while, she decided, for them all to settle to uncongenial jobs provided that one of them, just one of the family, could eventually rise to fame and distinction. And this one, as seemed obvious at that time—in fact, there was no question about it—would undoubtedly be Branwell.

After this common-sense viewing of the situation, disappointment was momentarily forgotten and all the hopes of the entire family were still further concentrated on the luckless Branwell. Not that Branwell objected. On the contrary, he accepted homage and adulation as his due and was quite prepared to fulfil all expectations. For was he not exceptionally brilliant? Could not he write stories and poems, paint pictures, compose music, play the piano, organ and flute? Was not he the pride of the village, famed for his cleverness, his conversation and his wit? And did not everybody like him and succumb immediately to his originality and his charm?

Branwell had none of the diffidence, the lack of self-confidence of his sisters. He had instead a belief in himself which verged on a conceit that was fatuous. There may at this time, however, have been good grounds for his self-satisfaction. It is true that some Brontë students have denied him the smallest remnant of genius, or even of talent. But Mrs Gaskell, who was in closer contact with the Brontë family than any other biographer, and whose literary opinion is certainly of value, wrote of him as a young man of 'noble impulses as well as extraordinary gifts'. She praised his



prose writing highly, comparing it to Addison in the *Spectator*. And there are artists who have praised his paintings, ascribing to him a very vivid sense of aesthetic beauty and a masterly handling of drawing. It seems certain that he had, as a young man, a genuine passion for art and that he spent hours and hours poring over books on the subject and studying pictures and engravings. The fatal drawback to the realization of his ambitions, to the flowering of his talents, was his weakness of character. He had not the grit or the determination to surmount all obstacles in the pursuit of a definite goal. He was good at too many things and this, in itself, was detrimental to success. He was the first of the Brontës to break into print, with a poem in the *Leeds Mercury*, but poetry was only a sideline to his many other activities. He lacked concentration. Everything came too easily, and anything that did not come easily he abandoned for something else. His interests were intense but seemed to lack depth. There is something tragic about Branwell with his artistic passions and his genuinely noble impulses—for everyone seems agreed that he was *not* inherently vicious—making in the end such a bitter failure of his short life.

Even now, occasionally, in these early years, it is probable that he was beginning to drink. When he was sent for by the landlord of the 'Black Bull' to entertain guests and commercial travellers, he would be tempted to have his glass of whisky with the rest. His father seems to have made no effort to find any suitable occupation for his leisure hours. He taught Branwell all he knew, including Latin and Greek, but when that was done for the day he retired to his study and took no further interest in him. None of the Brontës seems to have indulged in outdoor activities. The garden at Haworth Parsonage, which is now attractive with shrubs, trees and flower-beds, remained in their day a bare patch with a few isolated currant-bushes. It might, one imagines, have done with some attention, and might have added considerably to the brightness of their lives, but nobody—with the possible exception of Emily whom we once hear of as having been given some flower seeds, Sicilian pea and crimson cornflower, as a present from Ellen—apparently took the slightest interest in it. Whenever



Branwell got out of the house he made off at once to the village. The attraction of the company at the 'Black Bull' was irresistible and it was becoming a habit.

But even now, and in spite of all signs and portents, the family still believed in him. They did not realize how desperately he was in need of help and guidance but ascribed all his weaknesses and extravagances to the natural exuberance of youth. They thought only a little time and patience were needed, and before very long Branwell would abandon all youthful indiscretions and settle down to becoming a great artist. His sisters, however doubting of their own talents, never seem to have doubted his. He painted portraits of them all at this time, notably the well-known group now in the National Portrait Gallery, and achieved good likenesses, though the execution was crude. Ignoring his moral qualities, his sisters pinned their faith on his potential talents. Artistic training, they decided, was all he needed to achieve success, and this training, Charlotte made up her mind, he should have. Whatever sacrifices they themselves might have to make, however uncongenial the outlook for their own lives, Branwell must be given his chance. He should go as a pupil to the Royal Academy in London and there, in that fabulous and brilliant city—the Mecca of all Brontë hopes—he would achieve, no doubt, his fame and fortune.

#### IV

When Charlotte made up her mind about anything it was usually done. Before very long she was writing to tell Ellen of their plans:

I had hoped to have had the extreme pleasure of seeing you at Haworth this summer, but human affairs are mutable, and human resolutions must bend to the course of events. We are all about to divide, break up, separate. Emily is going to school, Branwell is going to London, and I am going to be a governess. This last determination I formed myself . . . knowing well that papa would have enough to do with his limited income, should Branwell be placed at the Royal Academy, and Emily at Roe Head. Where am I going



to reside? you will ask. Within four miles of yourself, dearest, at a place neither of us is unacquainted with, being no other than the identical Roe Head mentioned above. Yes, I am going to teach in the very school where I was myself taught. Miss Wooler made me the offer, and I preferred it to one or two proposals of private governess-ship, which I had before received. I am sad—very sad—at the thought of leaving home; but duty—necessity—these are stern mistresses, who will not be disobeyed.

Charlotte's stoicism and her stern self-discipline buoyed her up to fulfil these plans. There was, too, some real emotional satisfaction in feeling that she was doing her best to help Branwell, and also in the knowledge that at Roe Head she would only be four miles from Ellen. These were the two people in her life whose happiness most concerned her, whose society she most valued, and whose existence brought the most comfort to her affectionate heart.

It was now 1835 and Charlotte was nineteen. She was still very small and undeveloped in spite of being fully grown. In appearance she had not changed very much. Her features were still plain and irregular, her nose thin and awkwardly shaped, her complexion sallow, and her mouth too large. She was not pretty and knew now that she never would be. It was a knowledge that brought her much unhappiness. In later years her publisher, George Smith, said that he thought Charlotte would have given all her genius and all her fame to have been beautiful. Few women, he thought, existed who were more anxious to have been pretty. But Mary Taylor, when Charlotte first went to school, had told her that she was 'very ugly' and this was a fact that she was never able to forget. It did not rankle as a hurtful criticism from a friend—Charlotte was too humble for that and she accepted Mary's words as truth—but it sapped her small store of confidence, making her self-conscious and uneasy. She went to the other extreme of exaggerated self-criticism, believing herself to be devoid of any attraction at all. Yet, although she was plain, she could not have been so completely unattractive as she imagined. Most people who knew her were struck by the beauty of her



Ellen Nussey



Mary Taylor





M. Constantin Heger

eyes. They were of an indefinable colour, some say brown, some say grey, but all agree that they were vivid and unusual. They were expressive eyes and they may well have lit up her face into a brilliance of animation which transformed her plainness. Her hair, too, when she left off wearing it in tightly frizzed curls and combed it smoothly instead on either side of her face, was soft, thick and silky. She had a high forehead, a thoughtful beauty of expression, and attractively small hands and feet which perfectly matched her size. There must have been something appealing about her. She had in her life four proposals of marriage and she made several enduring friendships.

Charlotte, all her life, was, however, constitutionally incapable of an optimistic outlook on any matter connected with herself. She had, as she told Mrs Gaskell, and as Mrs Gaskell very early noticed for herself, an almost complete absence of hope. She never dared to look forward trustfully, to have any confidence in the future. She was sensitive always of outstaying her welcome, of anticipating happiness, or of loving too much. Partly, no doubt, this depressed state of mind was due to that terrible early shock of her sisters' deaths. It was also due to poor physique, and to nervous and imaginative exhaustion. There were conflicts in Charlotte's nature which wore down and crippled her—the prim, puritanical precepts of her upbringing at war always with an eager, passionate and undisciplined heart, and the ardent longing for emotional experience, travel, adventure, knowledge, trammelled perpetually by her shyness, her homesickness, and her unstable nervous system.

It was, then, with little faith in her own future, but only with dogged determination to sustain her, that Charlotte set out in July of 1835 to make herself into a teacher at Roe Head School. Teaching was never a prospect that had appealed to her. She knew herself to be unfitted for it, both by temperament and inclination. But in those early Victorian days, when women's lives were so circumscribed and frustrated, there was not very much choice in the matter. For a gentleman's daughter teaching was about the only profession that was considered respectable.



The only alternative was marriage. And marriage, however much desired and longed for, was not, Charlotte decided, likely to come your way if you were poor and plain and insignificant, a parson's daughter living in the depths of the country, with few opportunities for social or cultural contacts of any sort.

So teaching it had to be. It was cheering, anyhow, that she could take Emily with her and cheering, too, that she was to be with her old and valued friend, Miss Wooler, instead of in a school where she would have to take her place among strangers. Miss Wooler was an intelligent woman, she had been attached to Charlotte from the first, and she thought highly of Charlotte's scholastic ability. She has been described by Ellen as 'short and stout, but graceful in her movements, very fluent in conversation, and with a very sweet voice'. In the evenings, after the girls had gone to bed, she and Charlotte would sit together, talking of things that were of mutual interest, sometimes far into the night. Miss Wooler, usually, wore white and her long plaited hair formed a coronet with large ringlets falling on her shoulders. 'She was not pretty or handsome, but her quiet dignity made her presence imposing. She was nobly scrupulous and conscientious—a woman of the greatest self-denial.' Charlotte liked and approved of her. Later on they had their tiffs—once almost amounting to a definite breach—but in the end they were friends for life and Miss Wooler gave Charlotte away at her wedding.

The seeds of this friendship had been already sown during Charlotte's years as a pupil at Roe Head. And now, as a teacher, Charlotte strained every nerve to satisfy her old friend. Almost from the first, however, things began to go wrong. The first blow to Charlotte's carefully built plans was the news from home that Branwell had returned from London after only a few days, that he had not gone as a pupil to the Royal Academy after all. This must have been a great shock. All Charlotte's efforts, her self-sacrifice, the taking of this uncongenial job, had centred round the hope of Branwell's brilliant future. And now here, right at the beginning, was this incomprehensible setback, this frustration, this failure.



For failure it was—and a failure that to this day has never been satisfactorily explained. What happened to Branwell in London? He had set out with such high hopes, had even gone to the trouble of studying maps and plans of the city until he knew his way about as well as any Londoner born. He had apparently written to the Royal Academy to ask admittance, for Clement Shorter found a draft of this letter among his papers:

To the Secretary, Royal Academy of Arts.

Sir,

Having an earnest desire to enter as probationary student in the Royal Academy, but not being possessed of information as to the means of obtaining my desire, I presume to request from you, as Secretary of the Institution, an answer to the questions—

Where am I to present my drawings?

At what time?

and especially

Can I do it in August or September?

Your obedient servant,

Branwell Brontë

Yet from all these plans, these careful meticulous preparations, nothing whatever materialized. It may have been that Branwell lost his money, that he got into bad company and spent it all, or that he had it stolen from him. It may have been that the Royal Academy declined to accept him as a pupil. There seems no means of telling. We just do not know. Only one hint of what *might* have happened has been given to us, and this from Branwell himself. It is a short sketch he wrote of a young man, on the threshold of life, who went to London to seek his fortune, but when he got there idled away his time at inns drinking, day-dreaming, and, feeling himself unable to face reality, finally returned home again, having accomplished nothing. This may well have been what happened to Branwell. Perhaps he, too, was afraid to try for fear of failure. The highly coloured romances of Angria, the excessive hopes of his family, and all the shortcomings of his education and upbringing, allied to his own weakness of character, had ill fitted him for facing the world, alone in a great



city, with little ahead to look forward to but poverty and hard work.

Once back at Haworth Branwell felt more at ease. Here he received praise, admiration. He felt that he was properly appreciated at his true worth. Life was made easy for him. At the 'Black Bull' he was always welcome. And if, at moments, there might be qualms of self-doubt, about himself, about his qualifications for life, about his future, he could always drown such uncomfortable thoughts by having a drink. He screwed money out of his indulgent father and spent it on drink. And then, for a time at any rate, he felt happier.

It was, of course, the beginning of the end for Branwell, although the end was still a long way off. If Charlotte realized the seriousness of the situation she probably refused to acknowledge it. She still loved Branwell devotedly and could not yet have faced the bitter fact that he might be unworthy of her devotion. Besides now she had other things on her mind, other worries. It was dawning on her gradually, day by day, that Emily, who had come with her to Roe Head as a pupil, was not settling down properly. Emily was unhappy. She was growing thin, pale. She pined for home to such an extent that all her days were a desolation. She hated strangers and crowds, she made no friends. Longing only for solitude, for her beloved moors at Haworth, she woke up every morning in despair at the day ahead of her. Such unhappiness, such misery, could not go on. Charlotte, always a martinet where the protection of her beloved family was concerned, decided that something, and something drastic, must speedily be done about it.

## V

Something was done and Emily was sent home. Charlotte said that if she had not gone home she would have died. Charlotte has been accused of not understanding Emily but she understood her to the extent of realizing that Emily's homesickness, her dislike of strangers, and her inability to fit into a normal gregarious



life, were more potent realities even than Charlotte's own. Charlotte not only understood but she sympathized. She did not blame Emily for giving up the unequal struggle, and it was she, in fact, who obtained Emily's recall.

So Emily returned to the Parsonage where, in the intervals of solitude, writing poems and day-dreaming on the moors, she led an active practical life cooking, ironing, bread-making for the family; and in her place Anne was sent to Roe Head School. This was a change for the better and all might have gone well only, unfortunately, by this time Charlotte's own health was undermined. She was struggling to make herself into a passable teacher and, by sheer will-power, succeeding; but the effort, combined with these other worries, was exhausting her. There was always in Charlotte a streak of intolerance, of harshness and asperity, which was caused chiefly by the grimness of her own struggle with its resulting nerve strain. Because of this she did not suffer fools gladly and sometimes she had a sharp tongue. The effort of trying to din knowledge into the heads of girls less intelligent than herself—girls who often seemed purposely casual, stupid, uncaring—irked and maddened her. She wrote of the 'asinine stupidity of these fat-headed oafs' and beat herself in hopeless inward despair against the bars of her prison. But she would do nothing to lighten the burden. A slave to her own conscientiousness, she was so terrified of seeming in any way to shirk her duties that she would hardly ever accept the invitations of her friends, Ellen and Mary, both of whom lived in the near neighbourhood, to go out and visit them, even when urged by Miss Wooller to do so. She gave herself up almost entirely to her work, warred ruthlessly with her real personality, with her vivid imagination and her creative longings, and wore herself out in one long round of uncongenial bondage.

The only bright light in this sea of depression was her love for Ellen. Although Charlotte would seldom accept Ellen's invitations to visit her, she often wrote to her. More than ever now, in her troubled exhaustion, this correspondence was Charlotte's safety-valve. Her affection took on a new intensity, she imbued Ellen



with all sorts of virtues and saint-like qualities which could not possibly have been hers, and poured out her heart to her. She had decided now that her one hope for the future lay in this friendship. It was insupportable to look forward to a future given over entirely to teaching, to uncongenial posts as schoolmistress or private governess. The emotional aridness of such a prospect appalled her. Why instead could not she and Ellen throw in their lot together: if only they could have a cottage, just a small income of their own, why could not they live together, be together always? Her letters harped on this new theme. She was terrified that Ellen might grow tired of her: 'Don't desert me, don't be horrified at me—you know what I am—I wish I could see you, my darling. I have lavished the warmest affections of a very hot, tenacious heart upon you. If you grow cold—it's over . . . .'. Abandoning completely her Yorkshire reserve, endearments broke out freely—'dearest, my darling, *dear dear E.*'. And when there was some hope that Ellen would be visiting her at Roe Head: 'If you love me, *do, do, do* come on Friday: I shall watch and wait for you, and if you disappoint me, I shall weep.'

The holidays at Haworth provided Charlotte's one chance of a renewal of happiness, of recuperation. In the summer holidays Ellen went to the Parsonage to stay with the Brontës. At Christmas Charlotte and Branwell seriously put their heads together in a desperate effort to plan some alternative means of livelihood to the depressing vista of teaching. They had never given up their writing—during term-time Branwell kept up the lively annals of *Angria* and in the holidays Charlotte joined in—and they decided that it would be a good plan to get some expert advice on their chances of authorship. It was arranged that Charlotte should write to the Poet Laureate, Southey, and Branwell should write to Wordsworth, and they would both enclose some verses.

The letters were written and sent off. Then there came a long and agonizing suspense of waiting. Every evening, after their father and aunt had gone to bed, the young Brontës paced round and round their sitting-room, talking, discussing, planning. They were obsessed with the problem of their future. Compared



to their romantic dreams, reality so far had brought them little that was not drab and depressing. But they had all lately taken to writing poetry and now a tentative confidence was beginning to creep into their minds, a faint dawning hope in their own abilities. Their imaginations became excited, inflamed. But potent as well was the still small voice of common sense, warning them against self-delusion.

The holidays came to an end and Charlotte had to return to the bondage of Roe Head, without having received any answer to her letter to Southey. At the beginning of March, however, Southey suddenly wrote. Unfortunately the letter was not encouraging. Although he professed to recognize in Charlotte the 'faculty of verse' he wrote her a rather admonitory discourse on the folly of abandoning the practical things of life for unproductive day-dreams. 'Literature', he said, 'cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation.'

Charlotte was pleased with this letter. So delighted was she that Southey had taken the trouble to write to her at all, that she accepted all his strictures with humility. 'Mr Southey's letter', she told Mrs Gaskell years later, 'was kind and admirable: a little stringent, but it did me good.' Poor Charlotte! She had such strange ideas of what did her good. It had been the same with that other heartbreak years earlier when Mary Taylor had told her that she was 'very ugly'. Afterwards, when they had become greater friends, Mary had apologized, but all Charlotte could say was: 'You did me a great deal of good, Polly, so don't repent of it.' She had in her nature a melancholy masochistic streak which caused her to welcome criticism and rebuff, and to accept it as justly merited, however much it made her suffer.

After receiving Southey's letter, however, she was sufficiently stimulated by his interest to write to him again. She thanked him for his 'kind and wise advice' and in self-defence against his accusations of useless day-dreaming told him some of the hard facts of her life—of her father's limited income, of her own



## PASSIONATE SEARCH

efforts at teaching, of the little time she had at her disposal for dreaming or writing. But chiefly this second letter was to express gratitude for the trouble he had taken in writing to her at all. 'How thankful I am for your kindness.' 'That letter is consecrated; no one shall ever see it, but papa and my brother and sisters.'

Southey, perhaps touched by her humility, perhaps impressed by the felicity of literary style of his unknown correspondent, wrote again in his turn:

Keswick,  
March 22, 1837.

Dear Madam,

Your letter has given me great pleasure, and I should not forgive myself if I did not tell you so. You have received admonition as considerately and as kindly as it was given. Let me now request that, if you should ever come to these Lakes while I am living here, you will let me see you. You would then think of me afterwards with the more goodwill, because you would perceive that there is neither severity nor moroseness in the state of mind to which years and observation have brought me.

It is, by God's mercy, in our power to attain a degree of self-government, which is essential to our own happiness, and contributes greatly to that of those around us. Take care of over-excitement, and endeavour to keep a quiet mind (even for your health it is the best advice that can be given you): your moral and spiritual improvement will then keep pace with the culture of your intellectual powers.

And now, madam, God bless you!

Farewell, and believe me to be your sincere friend,

Robert Southey

In his efforts to arouse Wordsworth's interest Branwell was not so fortunate. Wordsworth received the letter Branwell had written to him in January but he made no attempt to answer it. He was, as he confessed later, disgusted by the tone of the letter, by its conceit, and the exaggerated flattery of himself. He took it, too, as an insult to his friends and fellow poets. 'Surely,' wrote Branwell, 'in this day, when there is not a *writing* poet worth a



sixpence, the field must be open, if a better man can step forward.' It was a foolish and irritating letter for a young and unknown man to have written to a man of Wordsworth's fame. And yet something in the letter must have roused Wordsworth's curiosity, held his interest. At all events he did not destroy the letter, he kept it, and years later in 1850 when the Brontës had become famous, he suddenly produced it for the inspection of his friends.

This letter to Wordsworth was not Branwell's first or only attempt to ingratiate himself with the literary world. He had already written several letters some time earlier to the editor of *Blackwood's Magazine*, pointing out, with an embellishment of self-confident conceit, his qualifications for becoming a contributor to that journal, and exhorting the editor to see reason by accepting him. 'I *know* that I am not one of the wretched writers of the day. I know that I possess strength to assist you beyond some of your own contributors. . . .' 'You have lost an able writer in James Hogg, and God grant you may get one in Patrick Branwell Brontë.'

The editor, unimpressed, and no doubt irritated by the implied criticism of his magazine, made no effort to reply to Branwell's letters. Nothing daunted, Branwell persisted: 'Do you think your Magazine so perfect that no addition to its power would be either possible or desirable? Is it pride which actuates you—or custom—or prejudice? Be a man, sir!' But it was no use. The editor of *Blackwood's* remained silent and unmoved. And finally Branwell had to give up.

The tone of these letters is certainly exaggerated to a laughable degree. They show signs of an unbalanced nature and, some critics think, of actual mental derangement. This is, of course, one of the facets of Brontë history on which critics disagree. Was Branwell a brilliant young man, ruined by a bad upbringing? Would he have been able, as Augustine Birrell and others have thought, to take an honoured place in the world if only he had been disciplined and well trained in his youth? Or was he, from the first, unstable, completely unreliable and even mentally deranged?

These are difficult questions to answer.



## VI

After Southey's not very encouraging advice, Charlotte tried to settle down once more into the rut of school-teaching. Her post was not a very remunerative one—she earned only enough to pay for her own and Anne's clothes—but it was all that she could expect with her limited educational qualifications. As she said to Mary Taylor who remonstrated with her on the poor return for her efforts, 'What else can I do?' And, at all events, she was now providing for her own keep and was no longer a drag on her father's resources.

Unfortunately though, at this time, Miss Wooller's school was moved. Roe Head had been in a healthy, open, breezy position but the new site, Dewsbury Moor, though only a few miles away, was low-lying and depressing. The change did not agree with the health of either Charlotte or Anne. Charlotte's depression became more acute and was further enhanced by new troubles. She was again worried over Emily, who had made another effort to leave home and to earn her own living by taking a post at Law Hill School, Halifax. This was not a success. Struggle as she might, Emily's homesickness, her longing for freedom and the familiar scenes of Haworth, wrecked and prostrated her. She was, too, according to Charlotte, shamefully overworked. Charlotte describes it in a letter: 'Hard labour from six in the morning until near eleven at night, with only one half-hour of exercise between. This is slavery.' Emily stuck it as long as she could. She was not unpopular, although she is reported to have told a class of small girls that she preferred the dog to any of them. But at the end of six months she had to give up the post and return home.

The fortunes of the family were at a low ebb. Branwell, too, had left home about this time and taken a job as tutor. But it did not last long and he was soon back at the Parsonage, kicking his heels with nothing particular to do. It is probable that now, for the first time, a feeling of apprehension about Branwell took root in Charlotte's mind. She had worked herself into a state when almost everything in her life was appearing to her in a grey and



sinister light. There was little to comfort her and now, against her will, and even at the risk of an idolatry which she dreaded, she found herself indulging more and more in unproductive day-dreams. At every opportunity, as an antidote to the grim struggle of teaching, she began to conjure up those figures from the Angrian world who so often in the past had been more real to her than reality. As she sat in the schoolroom at Dewsbury Moor the romantic physical presence of the 'Duke of Zamorna' would seem to appear before her, dispelling gloom and cheerlessness, making her breath come faster—a happiness only to be dashed away from her the next instant as, with some matter of fact comment from a colleague, some banality from a pupil, she was pitchforked back once more into the unutterable bleakness of real life. To add to her unhappiness she was separated from her beloved Ellen, who had gone away on a long visit to Bath. In her letters to Ellen Charlotte gave rein to her desolation. She told Ellen of her feelings of despair, of unworthiness. A kind of religious melancholia descended on her and, encouraged in this hysteria by reading the poems of her favourite Cowper, she believed that her own shortcomings were so great that she would be denied all Christian salvation. This conviction tormented her. She pleaded with Ellen to come home:

When will you come home. . . . Come, come.

Saturday after Saturday comes round, and I can have no hope of hearing you knock at the door.

What shall I do without you? How long are we likely to be separated? Why are we to be denied each other's society? It is an inscrutable fatality. I long to be with you, because it seems as if two or three days, or weeks, spent in your company would beyond measure strengthen me in the enjoyment of those feelings which I have so lately begun to cherish. You first pointed out to me the way in which I am so feebly endeavouring to travel, and now I cannot keep you by my side, I must proceed sorrowfully alone. Why are we to be divided? Surely, it must be because we are in danger of loving each other too well—of losing sight of the *Creator* in idolatry of the *creature*.



Charlotte's nervous exhaustion was growing upon her daily. The frustration of her life, the emotional emptiness, and the consciousness of her creative powers going utterly to waste filled her with despair. But it was quite impossible to combine teaching with any constructive form of creative art. It needed all her powers of mental energy to do what was expected of her in her job and there was little peace or quiet in the life that she was now leading. It is said of her that she was a misfit and unhappy as a teacher because she disliked children and had little sympathy with young people. Perhaps this, like some other criticisms of Charlotte, is not altogether fair. Charlotte's imagination burned out her frail body and her vitality was all too easily sapped. It was not so much that she disliked children as that being with them all the time exhausted her. She was, as she knew well herself, temperamentally and physically unfitted to be a school-teacher. Her nerves becoming raw and exposed, she would lash out in irritation and intolerance. And her own ruthless will-power made matters worse, driving her beyond her powers of endurance, until at times she hung on to self-control only by a thread.

But what she endured for herself she could not endure for others. She had sent Emily home and now all her worst fears and apprehensions were aroused on behalf of Anne. Ever since the school had moved to Dewsbury Moor Anne had been ailing. She had a continual cold and cough, her breathing was difficult, and she had a pain in her side. Charlotte, remembering Maria and Elizabeth, watched her in an anguished apprehension. At last, unable to bear it any longer, she went to Miss Wooler and poured out the fears that were in her mind. Miss Wooler, however, was sceptical; she did not take such an alarmist view as Charlotte and unfortunately said so. Charlotte felt that Miss Wooler was uncaring of Anne's welfare and far too casual, and she lost her temper. There was a bitter scene between the two women. Miss Wooler wept and wrote to Mr Brontë, telling him what had happened, and complaining of Charlotte's reproaches. As soon as this letter arrived at Haworth Mr Brontë took fright himself and sent for both Anne and Charlotte. Charlotte wrote to Ellen:



I had formed a firm resolution—to quit Miss Wooler and her concerns for ever—but just before I went away she took me into her room, and giving way to her feelings, which in general she restrains far too rigidly, gave me to understand that in spite of her cold repulsive manners she had a considerable regard for me and would be very sorry to part with me. If anybody likes me I can't help liking them, and remembering that she had in general been very kind to me, I gave in and said I would come back if she wished me.

The quarrel was made up, and for the rest of Charlotte's life she and Miss Wooler were good friends. But Charlotte's difficult days at the school were nearly over. She went home with Anne and spent Christmas at Haworth as usual. During these holidays she had another disappointment. Ellen was coming to stay, but her visit had to be cancelled owing to an accident to Tabby. The weather had been frosty and cold and Tabby, on her way to the village, slipped on the ice in the steep street and fell, breaking her leg. As she was now helpless Miss Branwell tried to persuade Mr Brontë to let her go away to her sister's in the village to be nursed until she had recovered. This was prevented by the intervention of the three girls. They loved Tabby and felt that it was their duty to look after her themselves so they went on a hunger-strike until their father agreed that Tabby should remain. After that they nursed her themselves until she was better, besides doing all the work of the house.

This concern for their servants was a typical Brontë characteristic and one that was, in those days, comparatively rare. Charlotte, all her life, was solicitous for Tabby and Tabby's welfare. She would write to her and send her messages, and years later, when Charlotte was a famous woman on a visit to Mrs Gaskell one of her chief concerns was the buying of a shawl to take home as a present for Tabby.

Fortunately Tabby's leg healed, though her health never quite recovered from the shock. Christmas came and went and the day arrived for Charlotte to return to the school at Dewsbury Moor. She went back early in that year 1838 and made yet one more courageous effort to stick to her post. But now her nervous



symptoms were really giving cause for alarm. She began to be terrified herself of some of the unreal scenes she thought she saw, and of the strange voices she sometimes heard declaiming poetry. Any sudden noise made her tremble and feel sick and when startled she had difficulty in preventing herself from crying out. She seemed, as Mary Taylor said, 'to have no interest or pleasure beyond the feeling of duty' and, as a result, during the day she was finding it difficult to concentrate and at night she could not sleep.

On the advice of Miss Wooler a doctor was called in. He saw at once that Charlotte was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and told her that she must go home; she would never recover unless she got back among the people she loved, and had some rest and freedom. On this advice, with the matter taken out of her own hands, Charlotte gave in. She left Dewsbury Moor and returned to Haworth. The joy of being back again in her beloved home, with the brother and sisters whose companionship meant so much to her, soon had a good effect on her health. She wrote to Ellen:

A calm and even mind like yours cannot conceive the feelings of the shattered wretch who is now writing to you, when, after weeks of mental and bodily anguish not to be described, something like peace begins to dawn again.

Although health was returning and, with it, a rosier outlook on life, there were, however, still problems ahead. All Charlotte's carefully laid plans had so far come to nothing. No members of the family had yet established themselves as writers or as artists. Branwell was not studying at the Royal Academy and as school-teachers the sisters had failed. Much thought would still be needed to build up their futures if they were to avoid complete frustration. It was not, however, in Charlotte's nature to despair for long. There was one characteristic in her make-up that was never lacking, and that was courage.

## CHAPTER III

### *Charlotte and her Suitors*

I had not, and could not have, that intense attachment which would make me willing to die for him; and, if ever I marry, it must be in that light of adoration that I will regard my husband.

CHARLOTTE TO ELLEN

#### I

THE next three or four years, except for two unhappy but short periods of governessing, were some of the happiest of Charlotte's life. After her breakdown at Dewsbury Moor, there was no question for a time of her leaving home, and for a few months all the young Brontës were reunited at the Parsonage. It was not a state of affairs that could last. None knew better than Charlotte that soon they would all have to gird their loins once more, to battle with the world and earn their own livings. But in the meantime there was this respite. Just a few weeks of recuperation; of peace and companionship.

To further Charlotte's convalescence, Mary and Martha Taylor were invited on a visit to Haworth: Mary with her quick, decisive, intelligent mind, and Martha, the younger sister, vivid, attractive, gay. In spite of her shyness, Charlotte was always intensely, passionately interested in people, and she was a devoted and faithful friend. She wrote to Ellen to describe the visit. Her letter finishes:

They are making such a noise about me I cannot write any more. Mary is playing on the piano; Martha is chattering as fast as her little tongue can run; and Branwell is standing before her, laughing at her vivacity.

Charlotte was growing stronger, both mentally and physically. She was still young, young enough to seize on any ephemeral happiness and not to despair about the future, but always she



was conscious of time passing, time passing with so little fulfilled. There had been so little chance to satisfy her creative longings, her deep emotional needs. She often thought about marriage, and it was about this time, while she was still living at home, that she received the first of her four proposals. Unfortunately her suitor, Henry Nussey, clergyman brother to Ellen, was not a romantic figure. He was a grave, sedate and humourless young man, twenty-seven years old, who was making a systematic and somewhat cold-blooded search for a suitable wife. Having been rejected by the first of the eligible young women on his list (one imagines that he had a list), six months later he approached Charlotte. He wrote her a business-like letter, pointing out that he was planning to take pupils in his house, and later on to become a missionary, and that he was anxious to find a helpmeet to assist him in these projects. It was, so Charlotte said, 'a letter written without cant or flattery, and in a common-sense style which does credit to his judgment'.

All the same, she refused the proposal. As always, when her emotions were not involved, she studied the situation sanely, intelligently, objectively, and decided that she was not in love with Henry Nussey, and that she felt herself unsuitable to be his wife. 'I have no personal repugnance to the idea of a union with you,' she wrote to him, 'but I feel convinced that mine is not the sort of disposition calculated to form the happiness of a man like you.' Having gone on to inform him of the kind of woman who would suit him—somebody without too individual a character, a woman of mild temper, even spirits, piety and *personal attractions*—she later explained still further, in a letter to Ellen, the reasons for her refusal:

Now, my dear Ellen, there were in this proposal some things which might have proved a strong temptation. I thought if I were to marry Henry Nussey, his sister could live with me, and how happy I should be. But again I asked myself two questions: Do I love him as much as a woman ought to love the man she marries? Am I the person best qualified to make him happy? Alas! Ellen, my conscience answered *no* to both these questions. I felt that though I



esteemed, though I had a kindly leaning towards him, because he is an amiable and well-disposed man, yet I had not, and could not have, that intense attachment which would make me willing to die for him; and, if ever I marry, it must be in that light of adoration that I will regard my husband. Ten to one I shall never have the chance again; but *n'importe*. . . .

*N'importe* . . . ! Poor Charlotte. Reality, as usual, was so different from her day-dreams. And was this all that life was ever going to offer her? Never for an instant would she have allowed anyone to realize her chagrin. *N'importe, n'importe*. She faced the situation with her spartan common sense. Instead of the Duke of Zamorna, here as her suitor was Henry Nussey, a well-meaning and pedestrian-minded young curate looking for a suitable helpmeet. It might be her only chance of marriage—it probably would be. Should she accept? Should she? If she hesitated, there is no sign of this hesitation in her letters. It seemed that she made up her mind at once. Even if her dreams were only dreams she still clung to them. 'I had not, and could not have, that intense attachment which would make me willing to die for him—if ever I marry, it must be in that light of adoration that I will regard my husband.' It was a courageous decision, for the future held very little. As far as she could see there was only uncongenial governnessing to look forward to: weeks and months of homesickness, of struggles to adapt herself, of unremitting hard work.

If Henry Nussey was upset by her decision he was not the person to show it. Writing in his diary 'The will of the Lord be done', he set about indefatigably to cultivate the society of the next young woman on his list. Six months later he wrote to tell Charlotte of the successful ending to his quest. Miss Emily Prescott of Eversley had accepted him: he was engaged to be married at last.

Charlotte did not brood over this experience. She went on writing to Henry Nussey occasionally, and remained a good friend to him. In the meantime there were other more pressing matters clamouring for her attention. All the family again were



to break up, separate. Her period of convalescence was over and once more she must gird herself for the fray.

Branwell had already gone. Although, as he told his friend Leyland afterwards, his failure with the Royal Academy had been the turning-point of disaster in his career, he still at this time had hopes of earning his living as an artist. After more lessons from Mr Robinson at Leeds, he had now taken a studio at Bradford, and here he set up to become a portrait painter. His father, inevitably doubting, and by now only too painfully aware of his son's mercurial temperament, gave a nominal approval of this scheme. Probably there appeared little alternative. As a school usher or tutor, Branwell had not been a success. His father, who by now seemed to have given up all effort to get his son properly trained at an art school for a worth-while career, could only pray that this new venture might not be equally unfortunate.

Charlotte's sympathy with Branwell was lessening. She could not have failed to be shocked sometimes by his habitual self-indulgence. But she still championed the cause of all her family and would not willingly accept defeat. Branwell was to become a successful painter of portraits, she and Anne were to go out as governesses, Emily was to remain at home to help with the housework and cooking. In time everything was arranged. Anne found a post as governess to the children of a Dr and Mrs Ingham at Blake Hall, Mirfield, twenty miles south of Haworth; and Charlotte arranged to go a few miles in the other direction, to the home of a Mr and Mrs John Benson Sidgwick at Stone-gappe, a large house in Lothersdale.

Charlotte had been looking for a situation for some time. Having discovered in herself a talent for housework, she had even laughingly suggested to Ellen that she should take a place as a housemaid: 'I won't be a cook; I hate cooking. I won't be a nursery-maid, nor a lady's-maid, far less a lady's companion . . . I won't be anything but a housemaid.' But all the time she knew that it would have to be governessing—which she detested. The letter ends: 'Good-bye, my darling Ellen', and then, as P.S., 'Strike out that word *darling*, it is humbug'. The changes of mood



were typical of Charlotte at this time. By nature affectionate, impulsive, highly strung, she was trying to make herself cool and sedate and matter-of-fact. She was doing her best to accept life with all its bitter imperfections and not to be dismayed. If she gave way to apprehension it was not on her own account but on behalf of some other member of the family. She worried about Anne—Anne who was always so delicate and timid—going off in April to her first situation. 'Poor child! She left us last Monday; no one went with her; it was her own wish that she might be allowed to go alone, as she thought she could manage better, and summon more courage if thrown entirely upon her own resources.'

As things turned out, however, Anne was better off in her situation than Charlotte and far more contented. The Inghams were kind people and, although the children were difficult at times, Anne was by nature adaptable. Of the three Brontë girls, she was easily the most successful as a governess: she stayed longer in her situations and, perhaps because she was less of an individualist than the other two, she tried to make herself indispensable and loved. Charlotte, on the other hand, though she would not have admitted it herself, was in a state of rebellion from the start. Perhaps it is not surprising. She was a genius, a woman of exceptional feeling and intellect, and in those days the position of a governess in a private family was not enviable. In her novel *Shirley*, Charlotte, disguised as Mrs Pryor, has described her sufferings:

I was early given to understand that 'as I was not their equal' so I could not expect 'to have their sympathy'. . . . The ladies made it plain that they thought me 'a bore'. The servants, it was signified, 'detested me'. . . . My pupils, I was told, 'however much they might love me, and how deep soever the interest I might take in them, could not be my friends'.

Charlotte, with her warm heart and her hypersensitive temperament, found such treatment unbearable. She was always morbidly shy in other people's houses and pitifully in need of friendliness



and encouragement. A warm-hearted word of kindness and appreciation could soon win her heart, but in an atmosphere of off-hand indifference she froze and despaired. Mrs Sidgwick, her new employer, though superficially an amiable enough woman, was tough and unimaginative. No two more completely dissimilar beings than herself and Charlotte could possibly have been found anywhere; as a consequence she and Charlotte were hopelessly out of sympathy from the beginning, and there were continual clashes. Mrs Sidgwick was annoyed by Charlotte's shyness, by her fits of despondency, by her inability to control high-spirited children, by her sensitiveness to possible insult. What Charlotte thought of Mrs Sidgwick in return is shown plainly in a letter to Emily:

I said in my last letter that Mrs Sidgwick did not know me. I now begin to find that she does not intend to know me, that she cares nothing in the world about me except to contrive how the greatest possible quantity of labour may be squeezed out of me, and to that end she overwhelms me with oceans of needlework, yards of cambric to hem, muslin nightcaps to make, and, above all things, dolls to dress. I do not think she likes me at all, because I can't help being shy in such an entirely novel scene. . . .

## II

Things went from bad to worse. The children were spoilt and unruly and Charlotte found it difficult to keep them in order. We hear of a Bible being thrown at her, and also of the youngest boy throwing a stone which hit her on the temple. On this occasion her forehead was marked, but when Mrs Sidgwick enquired the cause she only said 'An accident, Ma'am' and did not give her little pupil away. This improved relations all round with her pupils, and they even began to show signs of affection for her. Later, during a meal, the little boy who had thrown the stone demonstratively put his hand into hers and said to her 'I love 'ou, Miss Brontë'. How pleased Charlotte must have been—



it was probably the first word of appreciation she had ever received in that unfriendly household. But her satisfaction was short-lived. Mrs Sidgwick raised her eyebrows. 'Love the *governess*, my dear!' The sarcasm was crushing.

Among such scenes as this Charlotte grew increasingly low-spirited. The children were with her the whole time and she had no time to herself at all; she felt and knew that as a governess she was a failure and this depressed her still further. The only member of the household who held any attraction for her was Mr Sidgwick. There is a pathetic story of an afternoon passed in his company: 'One of the pleasantest afternoons I have spent here—indeed, the only one at all pleasant—was when Mr Sidgwick walked out with his children and I had orders to follow a little behind. As he strolled on through his fields, with his magnificent Newfoundland dog at his side, he looked very like what a frank, wealthy Conservative gentleman ought to be.' Yes, she evidently admired Mr Sidgwick and, although she had to walk behind when even the dog was allowed to walk at his side, she bore no malice. He was the type of man she revered, the 'master' type, perhaps even a fitting hero for an Angrian romance, so she was able to forgive him much.

It was fortunate that this uncongenial post with the Sidgwicks was from the first only to be temporary. As it was, the three months must have seemed unending to Charlotte. As though things were not bad enough already, after a time she had to accompany the family on a visit to Mrs Sidgwick's father who, in his home at Harrogate, was entertaining a house-party of people, all of whom of course were strangers to Charlotte. The novelty of this experience overwhelmed her with nervous exhaustion, and she began to lose her sense of proportion. It seemed to her that she was left out of everything, that her only role in life was to keep the children quiet and amused; she felt herself to be surrounded by people who were 'proud as peacocks and wealthy as Jews', who despised her (as she despised them), and with whom she had nothing in common at all. The gayer the household became the more her own spirits were depressed and in the end



her melancholy became so marked that Mrs Sidgwick noticed it and took her to task. A few words of cheer, of affection, of encouragement, would probably have worked wonders, but sympathy was not a strong suit with Mrs Sidgwick, and instead she preferred to scold. Charlotte, who felt that she had been straining every nerve to try to please her employer, was appalled by the severity of her manner and the harshness of her language, and she cried bitterly.

Her cup of misery full to the brim, Charlotte thought of giving notice and leaving at once, but her habitual stoicism and iron resolve came to her rescue and she decided to stay. As she explained to Ellen: 'I said to myself, "I had never yet quitted a place without gaining a friend; adversity is a good school; the poor are born to labour, and the dependent to endure". I resolved to be patient, to command my feelings, and to take what came; the ordeal, I reflected, would not last many weeks, and I trusted it would do me good. I recollected the fable of the willow and the oak; I bent quietly, and now I trust the storm is blowing over me.'

She managed to endure the remaining weeks of her engagement, but this experience with the Sidgwicks was a disaster which seared itself into her mind and imagination, leaving an impression that was indelible and which lasted the rest of her life. The whole affair was, of course, distorted and coloured by her complete unsuitability for the post. Nevertheless, although Benson descendants say that the Sidgwicks were 'extraordinarily benevolent people, much beloved', it is obvious that Mrs Sidgwick's lack of imagination in her treatment of Charlotte bordered on inhumanity. And when, as probably happened, years later Mrs Sidgwick read in literary journals of her one-time governess being lionized as one of the greatest women writers of the day, one cannot help hoping, a little spitefully, that she may have winced a little in discomfort, remembering how strikingly and completely she and her family had failed to appreciate Charlotte's genius.

Back at home after this unhappy venture Charlotte wrote: 'I never was so glad to get out of a house in my life.' She knew,



with dread, that soon she would have to make another effort, try to find yet another situation, but her health had been affected, she was suffering from palpitations and other nervous symptoms, and a rest first was necessary. Everything at Haworth Parsonage was going on much the same. Anne was still away at Mirfield, where her employer was kind but the children a handful. Emily was apparently happy and contented at home in her detached, somnambulistic life of cooking, day-dreaming and walking on the moors. Branwell, as usual, had met with a setback. The studio at Bradford had not been a success and, after only a few months, he was home again, recalled by his father.

This was yet another failure on Branwell's part to make good and Charlotte's affection and tenderness were sometimes sharpened to asperity by the wrecking of all her hopes. We do not know exactly what happened to Branwell in Bradford but he probably did not earn enough money to keep himself and Mr Brontë may have heard rumours of time-wasting in hotel bars and neighbouring studios. It does not appear that his behaviour otherwise was very reprehensible. He seems to have made a genuine effort to establish himself as a portrait painter, he completed a good many portraits and the people with whom he lodged apparently thought highly of him. He was, as one of them rather surprisingly said afterwards, 'a very steady young gentleman, his conduct was exemplary, and we liked him very much'. It is a pity, perhaps, that Branwell was not allowed to stay longer in Bradford to pursue this artistic career which meant so much to him. But Mr Brontë could not let him alone. More than once in his career we hear of a 'recall' by his father, for no specified reason. Is it possible that Mr Brontë was hag-ridden by fear of the hereditary Brontë weakness, the tendency to alcoholism? He recognized it in himself—there were unfortunate moments of stress when he even gave way to it—and it seems possible that, haunted by fear of it for his son, he had no peace of mind unless Branwell was safely under the paternal roof.

Whatever his reasons the results were unfortunate. At home Branwell had not enough to do and, although he turned one of



the upstairs rooms at Haworth into a studio and tried to continue his painting, his life was becoming increasingly aimless. He and Charlotte were both still writing but their interest even in writing had begun to diverge. It is said of Branwell that he never really grew up; but Charlotte on the other hand was maturing rapidly. She was beginning to realize that the intense romanticism of life in Angria had little connection with reality, and she was becoming every day more of a realist. Her recent contacts with the outside world had inspired her to an absorbed interest in the emotions; the study of human nature fascinated her and, although she was shy and something of an introvert, she took a boundless interest in people for their own sake.

She found it a relief now to be home again for a time and at last, after the three months' tension of her stay with the Sidgwicks, she was able to relax. In her own home she was able to shed some of her shyness and even at times to become lively and animated. It was during this summer of 1839 that Mr Brontë's ex-assistant, Mr Hodgson, now a neighbouring vicar, brought the curate Mr Bryce to tea at the Parsonage. Mr Bryce, it seemed, was looking for a wife and Mr Hodgson, anxious to be helpful, was taking him round to look over the available girls of the district. The Brontës were eminently marriageable. Why not a Brontë? Mr Bryce was impressed at once; Charlotte, in one of her gayest moods, talked to him with liveliness and appreciation, laughed at his jokes, and appeared to him in a most favourable light. He was Irish, impulsive and susceptible. A few days later, to Charlotte's amazement, she received a letter in a strange handwriting which turned out to be Mr Bryce's proposal of marriage. A declaration of attachment, her second proposal! It seemed to her fantastic and, seen in that light, it could only be taken as a joke. She wrote to Ellen, rather a heartless letter, making a good story of the episode and describing her reactions:

Well! thought I, I have heard of love at first sight, but this beats all. I leave you to guess what my answer would be, convinced that you will not do me the injustice of guessing wrong. When we meet I'll show you the letter. I hope you are laughing heartily. This is



not like one of my adventures, is it? It more resembles Martha Taylor's.

But there was a sad ending to poor Mr Bryce's abortive love story. A few months later he died. This was a shock to Charlotte and she wrote again to Ellen:

He was a strong athletic-looking man when I saw him, and that is scarcely six months ago. Though I knew so little of him, and of course could not be deeply or permanently interested in what concerned him, I confess, when I suddenly heard he was dead, I felt both shocked and saddened; it was no shame to feel so, was it? . . . I am not in the humour for writing a long letter, so good-bye.

It was to be many years before Charlotte received another proposal of marriage. Although Mr Bryce's admiration and interest must have given her a little more confidence in her own attractions, and must have had something of a tonic effect on her spirits, she still professed to take an extremely pessimistic view of her own chances of marriage. 'I am certainly doomed to be an old maid', she wrote to Ellen. 'Never mind, I made up my mind to that fate ever since I was twelve years old.' It was a prospect which dismayed her, but one which she tried to face with philosophy and courage. The emotional needs and longings of a passionate heart were continually repressed, stifled, subjected to lectures and cold-water douches from the more reasoning and common-sensical side of her nature. Intensely passionate, she professed not to believe in passion: her advice to Ellen in May of 1840 is an essay in disenchantment:

Do not be over-persuaded to marry a man you can never respect—I do not say *love*, because, I think, if you can respect a person before marriage, moderate love at least will come after; and as to intense *passion*, I am convinced that that is no desirable feeling. In the first place, it seldom or never meets with a requital; and in the second place, if it did, the feeling would be only temporary: it would last the honeymoon, and then, perhaps, give place to disgust, or indifference, worse perhaps than disgust. Certainly this would be the case on the man's part; and on the woman's—God help her, if she is left to love passionately and alone.



And then again, the same pathetic dreary note, concealing so much longing:

I am tolerably well convinced that I shall never marry at all. Reason tells me so, and I am not so utterly the slave of feeling but that I can *occasionally* hear her voice.

### III

At Haworth Parsonage there were not many recreations or diversions and when, during the summer of 1839, Ellen suggested to Charlotte that they should go away together by themselves for a holiday at the seaside, the idea filled Charlotte with such a painful rapture of longing that she could hardly contain her excitement:

Your proposal has almost driven me 'clean daft'. . . . Say when you go, and I shall be able in my answer to say decidedly whether I can accompany you or not. I must—I will—I'm set upon it—I'll be obstinate and bear down all opposition.

She longed, intensely and passionately, for her first sight of the sea which, at the age of twenty-three, she had never seen. And, added to that, the prospect of Ellen's society delighted her: 'The fact is, an excursion with you anywhere, whether to Cleathorpe or Canada, just by ourselves, would be to me most delightful.' It seems a harmless enough desire, but there were tyrannical elements at the Parsonage and all sorts of obstacles began to present themselves. At first Charlotte hoped that she might get 'leave of absence' at least for a week, but it turned out that Aunt Branwell and Mr Brontë had set their hearts on a family holiday in Liverpool and therefore it was stipulated that Charlotte must give up her seaside plan. Charlotte yielded reluctantly but soon discovered that the Liverpool idea was mostly talk, nothing much more than a castle in the air, and one can hardly blame her, therefore, for reverting to her original plan to go for a holiday with Ellen. She packed her box and prepared everything for the journey, but even when this was accomplished there were still hitches and delays. The Haworth gig for some reason was marooned at Harrogate,



and there was no means of transport. Charlotte, not unnaturally, was growing restive: 'Papa decidedly objects to my going by the coach, and walking to Birstall, though I am sure I could manage it. Aunt exclaims against the weather, and the roads, and the four winds of heaven, so I am in a fix.' Papa, she went on to say, would willingly indulge her wishes but Aunt, from the first, had showed 'decided disapproval' of the scheme. She was still uncertain what to do when Ellen strong-mindedly took the law into her own hands, borrowed a carriage, and appeared in person to fetch Charlotte from the Parsonage, and so the seaside holiday which Charlotte had longed for so ardently took place after all.

It was a great success. It did Charlotte good to get away for a little while from her incessant round of duties and from the unconscious tyranny of her family. She and Ellen went to stay in a farmhouse at Easton, near Bridlington. At her first sight of the sea Charlotte was so moved that for a moment she was speechless; she made a gesture waving Ellen away from her as, with the tears running down her face, she tried to master her emotion. It was an experience which stayed long in her mind. Weeks later she was writing to Ellen:

Have you forgot the sea by this time? Is it grown dim in your mind? Or still can you see it—dark blue, and green, and foam-white; and hear it roaring roughly when the wind is high, or rushing softly when it is calm. . . .

Just the thought of this holiday brought her much retrospective happiness. The people at Easton had been kind; they all had merry evenings together and she and Ellen had romped with the child of the house, Hancheon. It was a change from the unsympathetic, disapproving atmosphere of Stonegappe, and even Charlotte was capable of romping when she was happy. This holiday with Ellen was one of her few carefree experiences and was long, as she said, a 'theme for pleasant recollection'.

Life at this time stirred excitedly within her, in spite of all attempted repression, and she found herself spurred afresh to creative effort. She parted company with Branwell, forsook



Angria, and started a novel on her own account. Part of this was sent to Wordsworth for his criticism but, unfortunately, again she received only a rebuff, and Wordsworth was no more impressed by her writing than Southey had been. The novel, it seems, was too elaborate, almost 'Richardsonian'. . . . It was evident that Charlotte herself had had doubts about its merits, as she professed herself to be undistressed at the thought of giving it up. Her letter to Wordsworth, replying to his strictures, is curiously pert, and was evidently written in one of Charlotte's less attractive moods of defiant resignation. Having concealed her sex from Wordsworth, she now professed to be 'pleased that you cannot quite decide whether I am an attorney's clerk or a novel-reading dressmaker. I will not help you at all in the discovery.' She thanked Wordsworth for his kind and candid letter and added: 'I almost wonder you took the trouble to read and notice the novelette of an anonymous scribe, who had not even the manners to tell you whether he was a man or a woman, or whether his "C. T." meant Charles Timms or Charlotte Tomkins.'

This damping criticism from Wordsworth again rebuffed Charlotte's efforts at authorship, and again she tried to resign herself to the only career which seemed open to her—the hated career of governess. 'I intend to force myself to take another situation', she wrote to Ellen, 'when I can get one, though I *hate* and *abhor* the very thoughts of governess-ship. But I must do it; and therefore I heartily wish I could hear of a family where they need such a commodity as a governess.'

But it was not easy to find a suitable situation—Charlotte's qualifications were not outstanding and no doubt there were many others in the field—and it was some months before she again left home. That Christmas of 1839 all the girls were busy at the Parsonage as Tabby was again ill. She developed an ulcer on her bad leg and became so lame that eventually she left the Parsonage and went to live with her sister in the village, where the girls were often able to visit her. A new maid, the sexton's daughter, Martha Brown, a young girl of eighteen, was engaged to help at the Parsonage eventually and paid the princely wages of seven pounds



## CHARLOTTE AND HER SUITORS

a year. But there was evidently a gap when the Brontës had no help in the house and Charlotte wrote to Ellen:

Emily and I are sufficiently busy, as you may suppose; I manage the ironing and keep the rooms clean; Emily does the baking, and attends to the kitchen. We are such odd animals that we prefer this mode of contrivance to having a new face amongst us.

All the Brontë girls, well trained by Aunt Branwell, were domesticated, and apparently they did not dislike domesticity for in the same letter Charlotte—after telling of her aunt's wrath when at her first attempt at ironing she burnt some clothes—goes on to say:

Human feelings are queer things; I am much happier black-leading the stoves, making the beds, and sweeping the floors at home, than I should be living like a fine lady anywhere else.

Anne was still in her situation at Mirfield, but she was finding it difficult as the children were very undisciplined, and in January of 1840 it was decided that she should leave. She had done her best as she, too, in spite of her timidity, had the same stoical powers of endurance as Charlotte; but she had not been happy. None of the Brontë girls took kindly to making their homes in other people's houses; they had not, as Charlotte penetratingly observed, 'the power of taking things easily as they come and of making oneself comfortable and at home wherever we may chance to be'. All, in their own way, had hypersensitive temperaments. Emily was the only one of the three who really managed to come to terms with life and that was only by detaching herself from it. This was made easier for her by the fact that she was not a person of strong human affections and, though capable of passionate feelings, her real world was in the realm of her imagination. Anne, with less intellect and no genius to sustain her, longed secretly for a normal woman's life of love, marriage, motherhood; and when this failed her she became melancholy and morbidly religious. Of the three, Charlotte was by far the most human, and perhaps the most lovable. She had not the chilling aloofness of Emily or the pious



resignation of Anne. Beneath her surface primness and her somewhat puritanical rigidity of thought, there beat always an undisciplined and passionate heart. There must, too, in spite of her plainness, have been something about her—a characteristic missing in her sisters—which attracted men. Perhaps her smallness and delicacy appealed to their chivalrous and protective instincts. Also they may have sensed the fact that, in spite of her indefatigable courage and self-reliance, Charlotte longed instinctively all her life for masculine sympathy and masculine support.

#### IV

It was inevitable that most of the men Charlotte met at this time were clergymen and it was unfortunate under the circumstances that she had such a dislike of curates. 'A self-seeking, vain, empty race' she called them, or even 'unattractive specimens of the coarser sex', and later, in her novel *Shirley*, she pilloried the curates of her acquaintance, including her future husband, Mr Nicholls, in a way that was hardly flattering.

But there are exceptions to every generalization, and the exception to Charlotte's sweeping condemnation was the curate, William Weightman, the first regular curate at Haworth, who came to help Mr Brontë in the parish somewhere about 1838. Willie Weightman, lovable, flirtatious, kind-hearted, was a difficult person to dislike; a graduate of Durham University, he came to Haworth at the age of twenty-three. His hair was auburn, his eyes were blue, and his cheeks were rosy: he was attractive and charming, light-hearted and clever, and the effect of his presence on the lives of the Brontë girls was spectacular and startling. He was very sociable and very youthful and his zest for life was infectious. A light-hearted gaiety now transformed the Parsonage. Because of his slightly feminine appearance the Brontës nicknamed the new curate 'Celia Amelia', and they took an absorbed interest in all his doings. Charlotte's letter's to Ellen became positively exuberant as, after a visit from Ellen to Haworth, she chaffed her friend unmercifully on her possible susceptibility to



Willie Weightman's charms and warned her not to take his attentions too seriously. For Willie Weightman, it seemed, fell in love as a matter of course with every girl he met and the history of his amours was long, entertaining and varied.

It was only with an effort, one feels, that Charlotte kept her own head and heart intact through the vicissitudes of this whirlwind friendship. If she had not been exceptionally clear-sighted and sensible she would probably have fallen in love with Willie Weightman herself. There is a curious note of elation in her letters at this time which certainly had been lacking before Mr Weightman appeared on the scene: 'I see everything *couleur de rose*, and am strongly inclined to dance a jig if I knew how', and occasional rather too vehement protestations: 'Let me have no more of your humbug about Cupid, etc. You know as well as I do, it is all groundless trash.' But, in spite of these occasional heart flutters, basically Charlotte saw Willie Weightman for what he was, an exceptionally lovable, kind-hearted and generous young man who, in his emotional life, was completely unstable. Instead of becoming one of his victims she felt it wiser and safer to play the role of confidante, to listen, unchiding and unscathed, to all the tales he had to tell her of his various amours and conquests, and to treat his flirtatious manners and light-hearted attentions to herself with the flippancy which she felt they deserved.

None of the inmates of Haworth Parsonage was unaffected by Willie's charm. Branwell claimed him as a dearest friend, the aloof Emily liked (some say loved) him, even Aunt Branwell, whenever he appeared on a visit, came downstairs to enjoy his society, and Anne, it seems highly probable, was in love with him. They were all bowled over by his attentive ways, his affectionate heart. 'No doubt there are defects in his character,' Charlotte wrote to Ellen, 'but there are also good qualities. God bless him! I wonder who, with his advantages, would be without his faults. I know many of his faulty actions, many of his weak points, yet, where I am, he shall always find rather a defender than an accuser.'

For who could fail to be touched by Willie's gallantries? When he heard that none of the Brontë girls had ever received a valentine,



he made valentines for them all, complete with suitably amorous verses, and walked the long distance of ten miles to Bradford in order to post them. He teased the girls and flirted with them, sang ballads and lyrics for their enjoyment, allowed them to paint his portrait and, when he was away on holiday, never forgot his friends at the Parsonage and sent them welcome presents of grouse, partridges, ducks and salmon. When he lectured at Keighley, as he sometimes did, he insisted that the Brontë girls must share in his triumphs: everything was arranged so that they might accompany him, including the provision of a neighbouring clergyman to act as chaperon on the midnight walk back to the Parsonage—a midnight invasion which displeased Aunt Branwell and made her lose her temper as she had only provided coffee for three. But nobody could be angry with Willie for long. His genuine kindness disarmed criticism. Everyone in the parish loved him and he loved them in return: their sorrows were his sorrows, and when one of Charlotte's Sunday-school scholars was dying, we hear of him taking wine and other delicacies to the invalid and becoming sad and despondent.

His own life in the end turned out to be pitifully short. He died of consumption at the early age of twenty-six, having been curate at Haworth for only three years. In his last illness Mr Brontë visited him twice a day and Branwell, who seems to have been genuinely attached to him, watched by his death-bed. At his funeral service Mr Brontë preached a special sermon and all the congregation of the parish crowded to hear it. The grave was under the north aisle of the old church and a tablet was erected to his memory, praising him:

For his orthodox principles, active zeal,  
Moral habits, learning,  
Mildness and affability.

It was, perhaps, the end of a chapter for Anne, the smothering of a romance, and the death of hope. Earlier we have a scene described by Charlotte to Ellen: 'He sits opposite Anne at church, sighing softly, and looking out of the corners of his eyes to win her



attention, and Anne is so quiet, her looks so downcast, they are a picture.' Perhaps, later, Anne was remembering moments such as this, when she wrote this poem:

Yes, thou art gone! and never more  
Thy sunny smile shall gladden me;  
But I may pass the old church door,  
And pace the floor that covers thee.  
May stand upon the cold, damp stone,  
And think that, frozen, lies below  
The lightest heart that I have known,  
The kindest I shall ever know.

V

They were all growing older and, though it was some happiness for the three girls to be at home together, their peace of mind was continually being shaken by Branwell's extravagances and Branwell's behaviour. At one time they had set such high hopes on his future, he had been the bright boy of the family, spoilt and indulged by them all; but now bitter reaction had set in and they were seized by terrible doubts. Branwell himself was still not entirely without hope. He painted pictures in his upstairs studio and wrote reams of pious and morbid poetry which showed, in the frequency of death scenes, that he, like Charlotte, was haunted all his life by the tragic deaths of Maria and Elizabeth. He still professed to believe in his own powers and had moments of confidence and ambition, but increasingly his stability, his will-power, his perseverance, were being whittled away in longer and longer bouts of idleness and drinking. It does not seem that at this time his appearance or manner were as yet much affected by his way of living. He still appeared to outsiders as a lively and attractive young man, a brilliant conversationalist, with a great deal of charm; and he entered actively and widely into the affairs of the village, being at one and the same time a convivial member of the Masonic Lodge of the Three Graces and secretary of the local Temperance Society.



As he had few friends of his own class and education nearer than Bradford, his chief confidante and ally in the village was John Brown, the sexton and grave-digger. When at length in 1840 Branwell went off to take a job as tutor to a Mr Postlethwaite at Broughton-in-Furness, it was to John Brown that he wrote the famous letter beginning 'Old Knave of Trumps', a letter which has sometimes been quoted to prove Branwell's inherent viciousness and profligacy, when really it does not show much more than an unadult silliness and a desire to show off. He tells his sexton friend: 'I took a half-year's farewell of old friend whisky at Kendal on the night after I left' and goes on to describe a drinking carousal ending in a riot. Finally, he says, he was helped to bed, with the room spinning round, and adds: 'Since then I have not tasted anything stronger than milk-and-water nor, I hope, shall, till I return at Midsummer; when we will see about it.' In this new environment at Broughton-in-Furness he was, so he points out to John Brown, playing the part of: 'A most calm, sedate, sober, abstemious, patient, mild-hearted, virtuous, gentlemanly philosopher—the picture of good works, and the treasure-house of righteous thoughts.' But whether the strain of maintaining this role was too great for him, or whether there were other causes of rupture, we are not informed. All we know is that his term of employment with Mr Postlethwaite came to an abrupt end after a few months, and at his father's bidding he returned home to the Parsonage.

Charlotte, by this time, was hardening herself to an acceptance of Branwell's failures. Before he had left for Broughton-in-Furness she had written to Ellen: 'How he will like to settle remains yet to be seen. At present he is full of hope and resolution. I, who know his variable nature, and his strong turn for active life, dare not be too sanguine.' And now here he was, just as she had anticipated, without a job once more, and back at Haworth. She was irritated, disappointed, frustrated. Branwell was no longer the love of her youth, the twin soul, the affinity, sharing all her intellectual longings, all her ambitions—but that does not mean that she had ceased to care for him. She still loved him—



months later she was writing to Ellen about her desire to see him, her fear of missing him, before she went to Brussels—but there was now a detached irony about her feeling for him, the acceptance of disillusionment.

Branwell, no doubt aware of her change of feeling and increasingly conscious of his family's loss of faith in him, was beginning himself to become irked and enfeebled by the sense of his own failure. His repeated literary disappointments were particularly disheartening to him. Lately he had translated three books of Horace's *Odes* into English verse, and while at Broughton-in-Furness he had scraped an acquaintance with Hartley Coleridge at Ambleside and shown him the translations. Although this meeting had encouraged him, and the translations were not without merit, nothing came of this, just as nothing came of all his other literary efforts. In a reaction of despair at his own failure to achieve success in the sphere which really appealed to him, he now turned his attention to completely new channels and decided to get a job on the railways. These were the pioneer days of railways and this new form of transport was sufficiently novel to grip popular imagination. The new Leeds and Manchester railway had just opened and Branwell managed to get a post as booking-clerk at Sowerby Bridge station, near Halifax. This would, he felt, provide him with a livelihood and a means of paying off his alarmingly increasing debts. It is possible too that, irked by the lack of all intellectual companionship at Haworth, he was anxious to get nearer to his more cultured and artistic friends in Halifax and Bradford.

Charlotte, however, was not impressed by this abandonment by Branwell of all her idealistic plans for his future. She tried to conceal her chagrin by a vein of rather heavy-handed sarcasm and wrote to Ellen:

A distant relation of mine, one Patrick Boanerges, has set off to seek his fortune in the wild, wandering, adventurous, romantic, knight-errant-like capacity of clerk on the Leeds and Manchester Railroad.

She was bitterly disappointed, and probably Branwell himself



was bitterly disappointed, too. It must have seemed a mundane anti-climax to the high hopes of his youth. Unfortunately, too, for his powers of endurance, it was not long before he was transferred from the comparatively lively Sowerby Bridge to the little station of Luddenden Foot, a mile or so farther up the line. Luddenden Foot station consisted of wooden platforms and a wooden hut; there was a single porter for staff, and Branwell was given the combined job of booking-clerk and ticket-collector. There was little for him to do, he was cut off from his friends, and the village consisted only of an inn and a few houses. He was bored, depressed and lonely, and the hours hung heavily. He drank alone in taverns, roamed restlessly over the hills, occasionally hired a gig and drove home to see his family. 'Had a position been chosen for this strange creature for the express purpose of driving him several steps to the bad', wrote a railway engineer friend, Francis Grundy, in describing Branwell's life at this time, 'this must have been it.'

It seems certain, anyhow, that from this time onwards Branwell's behaviour and health deteriorated rapidly. The defects of his character; his unreliability, self-conceit, lack of staying-power, combined with his unsound nerves—all contributed to his downfall. More than any of the rest of the family (though they all shared it) he had inherited the Celtic temperament: the melancholy and the imagination and the wayward individuality. Grundy described him as being at this time 'like a man moving in a mist who has lost his way'. He neglected his work, dramatized himself in alternate moods of hectic excitement and excessive remorse, and was frequently drunk. To add to his other excesses he had now discovered the enchantments of opium; Coleridge and De Quincey had shown him the path and, besides this, an unfortunate conviction had entered his head that opium could ward off the dangers of hereditary consumption. Every week that passed added to the hopelessness of his position. He said of himself afterwards that during this time at Luddenden Foot he required six glasses of whisky to stimulate him and added, with his usual wild and morbid self-dramatization, that he would rather have given his



hand than undergo again 'the grovelling carelessness, the malignant yet cold debauchery, and the determination to find out how far mind could carry body without both being chucked into hell' which, so he said, had characterized his life at this unhappy time.

## VI

Sadly disillusioned by Branwell, and with Ellen, though still a good and true friend, no longer the emotional centre of her life, Charlotte felt restless and unsettled. Even her writing at this time seems to have failed her. In a letter to Henry Nussey in January 1841 she wrote:

I shall be glad to receive the poetry which you offer to send me; you ask me to return the gift in kind. How do you know that I have it in my power to comply with that request? Once, indeed, I was very poetical, when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen and nineteen years old, but I am now approaching twenty-five, and the intermediate years are those which begin to rob life of some of its superfluous colouring. At this age it is time that the imagination should be pruned and trimmed—that the judgment should be cultivated, and a *few*, at least, of the countless illusions of early youth should be cleared away. I have not written poetry for a long while.

All the intense and passionate day-dreams of her youth were showing little fulfilment and time was passing. In spite of the driving resolution of her adolescent years, nothing much had happened to instil into her a faith in her own future. True, she had had two proposals of marriage. But so remote were these from the conception of love in her own mind and imagination, that she hardly seems to have given them any serious consideration. If life had nothing better to offer her than this pedestrian wooing, this counterfeit of romance, then it seemed to her that the only possible course open to her was to stick to her teaching. Always she was looking out for possible posts. 'I have answered advertisements without number', she told Ellen, 'but my applications have met with no success.' Although temporarily she found



it a delightful thing to live at home, as she had been doing these last few months, in full freedom and liberty, her conscience would not allow her to continue it. She was determined to earn her own living, not to be a drag on her father, to make herself independent. And even governess-ship, she comforted herself, might lead to something more satisfying eventually. Might it not be possible that one day she and her sisters between them could start a little school of their own? It was a project that had been occupying their minds lately to quite a considerable extent. It was still very nebulous, still very much a dream rather than a reality, but it gave them something to hope for, something to look forward to. It was there, always in their minds, their 'polar star', an exciting possibility which might make even teaching congenial and which would ensure a life where they could always be together.

Charlotte had strong ideas on feminine emancipation, far in advance of her time. She believed firmly that women should be given the chance of careers, of making themselves independent, just in the same way as men. They should not sit at home, as was the Victorian custom, patiently, resignedly, waiting for some man to come and marry them. The great curse of female life as she saw it was its dependency. As she grew older she never regretted the years of her youth which had been spent in teaching; and when advising her publisher friend, Mr Williams, some time later about his daughters' future, she wrote:

Your daughters—as much as your sons—should aim at making their way honourably through life. Do not wish to keep them at home. Believe me, teachers may be hard-worked, ill paid and despised, but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst paid drudge of a school. Whenever I have seen, not merely in humble, but in affluent homes families of daughters sitting waiting to be married, I have pitied them from my heart. It is doubtless well—very well—if Fate decrees them a happy marriage; but, if otherwise, give their existence some object, their time some occupation, or the peevishness of disappointment and the listlessness of idleness will infallibly degrade their nature.



These conflicting sides to Charlotte's nature—her iron determination to make her own way in the world allied to her shyness and her hatred of living in other people's houses—irreconcilable as they were, wrought havoc with her nervous system. But nothing would persuade her to give in. Early in 1841, both she and Anne set off again to take fresh posts as governesses. Anne went to the Reverend and Mrs Edmund Robinson at Thorp Green, where she was to stay for the next four years, while Charlotte found a post with a Mr and Mrs White at Upperwood House, near Rawdon.

This situation was a great deal pleasanter and more congenial than her previous post with the Sidgwicks, but again Charlotte found it difficult, if not impossible, to settle down happily. She acknowledged that she was fortunately placed: the Whites were kind people and the two elder children, a daughter of eight and a boy of six, were unruly but good-natured. It was not a large house but a very comfortable one with extensive grounds. Her salary was twenty pounds a year with expenses for washing deducted, which reduced it to about sixteen pounds. Everyone was polite to her: there was no unkindness, no incivility. 'If I can but feel that I am giving satisfaction', Charlotte wrote to Ellen, 'and if at the same time I can keep my health, I shall, I hope, be moderately happy. But no one but myself can tell how hard a governess's work is to me—for no one but myself is aware how utterly averse my whole mind and nature are to the employment. Do not think that I fail to blame myself for this, or that I leave any means unemployed to conquer this feeling. Some of my greatest difficulties lie in things that would appear to you comparatively trivial. I find it so hard to repel the rude familiarity of children. I find it so difficult to ask either servants or mistress for anything I want, however much I want it. It is less pain to me to endure the greatest inconvenience than to go into the kitchen to request its removal. I am a fool. Heaven knows I cannot help it!'

She was very homesick. In a letter to her one-time suitor, Henry Nussey, she reveals some of her feeling about being separated from her home and family:



## PASSIONATE SEARCH

As you say, it is indeed a hard thing for flesh and blood to leave home, especially a *good* home—not a wealthy or splendid one. My home is humble and unattractive to strangers, but to me it contains what I shall find nowhere else in the world—the profound, the intense affection which brothers and sisters feel for each other when their minds are cast in the same mould, their ideas drawn from the same source—when they have clung to each other from childhood, and when disputes have never sprung up to divide them.

All the emotional longing of her affectionate heart is revealed by these phrases. It was partly the emotional aridness of a governess's life which paralysed her: the feeling that she had to button herself up, be on her best behaviour, never give way to her feelings. In these first weeks of strangeness, in a strange household, some of the old intensity of her affection for Ellen began to reassert itself:

*Do, do, do* come to see me; if it be a breach of etiquette, never mind. If you can only stop an hour, come. Talk no more about my forsaking you; my dear Nell, I could not afford to do it. I find it is not in my nature to get on in this weary world without sympathy and attachment in some quarter; and seldom indeed do we find it. It is too great a treasure to be ever wantonly thrown away when once secured.

Mr and Mrs White did their best for her. Unlike Mrs Sidgwick they were distressed to think that their young governess might be forlorn and unhappy. They even invited Mr Brontë to come and stay in their house for a week, hoping no doubt that his visit might help to cure Charlotte's homesickness. But with her characteristic over-conscientiousness, which prevented her so often from accepting a kindness, Charlotte vetoed this plan. 'I don't at all wish papa to come; it would be like incurring an obligation.' She preferred to struggle on alone, trying to make the best of things. Ellen's home, at any rate, was only nine miles away and she could see Ellen sometimes. And she liked Mr White. Mr White was a kind man who gave her helpful advice about the school project and about her future career. Of Mrs White she was not quite so sure—some of her comments on poor Mrs White



are noticeably lacking in charity; but it was Mrs White, no doubt, who had to give her her orders, and Charlotte disliked being given orders by women. The sewing, too, had cropped up again. Mrs White expected her, as nursery governess, to do a good deal of sewing, and Charlotte found that she was always kept busy, she had no time to herself at all: no time to think, no time for the day-dreams which were a necessity of her temperament. It was a relief, she found, when Mr and Mrs White went away on a visit occasionally and she was relieved from the 'duty of always endeavouring to seem cheerful and conversable'. 'To speak truth', she confessed to Ellen, 'though I am solitary while they are away, it is still by far the happiest part of my time.'

But after a little while, as the weeks passed, things did begin to improve. When some of Charlotte's shyness wore off she began to appreciate her employers as they deserved, to realize that they were both kind and worthy people, and even to suspect sometimes that their kindness was more than she had merited. She knew that if she was discontented it was she herself who was very largely to blame. Partly, of course, her troubles were due to her health. Any sort of nerve strain undermined her and she was painfully aware of not having the 'animal spirits' to carry her successfully through a vigorous day. She grew fond of the baby but found the older children, her two charges, hard to manage; she was nervous and awkward with children; she felt herself to be 'a stranger' to them and this undermined her confidence. Perhaps, secretly, she longed for children of her own: children of her own flesh and blood, who would have been hers from the beginning, and whom she would have understood. May Sinclair, in her book *The Three Brontës*, suggests that a main cause of suffering in Charlotte's life was the frustration of her maternal feelings. She quotes in confirmation of this Charlotte's dream, a recurring dream, which in after years Charlotte confided to Mrs Gaskell, that she was carrying everywhere with her a little sick and crying child and, although distraught with pity for it, she could not still its cry.



## VII

The plans of the three Brontë girls for keeping a school of their own were at length showing signs of materializing. By the summer of 1841 their father and Aunt Branwell had begun to show interest in the scheme—Aunt Branwell had indeed made the generous offer of advancing one hundred or one hundred and fifty pounds out of her small income to provide the necessary funds. Charlotte was thrilled by this new development and, after spending a summer holiday at home, she went back to Upperwood House with a new hope in her heart and all sorts of possible schemes and ideas buzzing excitedly in her head. If they opened a school, where would be the best site for it? At first she thought of Bridlington, near where she and Ellen had spent that one delightful seaside holiday. But this idea was dropped when Miss Wooler wrote and suggested that Charlotte and Emily should take over Dewsbury Moor school as she was thinking of retiring. In return for her board and keep she offered the loan of her furniture.

At first this seemed an idea well worth considering and Charlotte had half a mind to accept. She was indeed on the point of accepting when another suggestion was made to her and she changed her mind. Mr and Mrs White, with whom she was now in the habit of discussing all her plans, persuaded her that she would have more chance of success in opening a new school, if first she had spent a few months on the Continent to polish up her languages.

Charlotte seized on this suggestion with enthusiasm. The idea of travelling and seeing something of the world was always one to inspire her to rapturous excitement. What further fired her imagination were the letters she had been receiving lately from Mary and Martha Taylor, who were at a finishing school in Brussels. They described to her picture-galleries, cathedrals, famous buildings, and made Charlotte burn with such a desire to share their opportunities of learning, seeing, knowing, that she could hardly contain her impatience, her fever of longing. She wrote now eagerly to Aunt Branwell, spreading these plans before her, beseeching her co-operation:



## CHARLOTTE AND HER SUITORS

I would not go to France or to Paris. I would go to Brussels in Belgium. . . . In half a year I could acquire a thorough familiarity with French. I could improve greatly in Italian, and even get a dash of German. . . . Martha is now staying in Brussels. . . . If I wrote to her she would be able to secure me a cheap and decent residence and respectable protection. . . . If Emily could share with me, we could take a footing in the world afterwards which we can never do now . . . . I feel certain, while I am writing, that you will see the propriety of what I say . . . depend upon it, £50, or £100, thus laid out, would be well employed. . . . I feel an absolute conviction that, if this advantage were allowed us, it would be the making of us for life.

It is a long letter, a letter which is a masterpiece of tact, cajolery and common sense, and it had the desired effect. After some delay, during which Aunt Branwell held earnest consultations with Mr Brontë, consent was given. Charlotte was overjoyed. Already she had written to Ellen:

I am not going to Dewsbury Moor, as far as I can see at present. It was a decent friendly proposal on Miss Wooler's part, and cancels all or most of her little foibles, in my estimation; but Dewsbury Moor is a poisoned place to me; besides I burn to go somewhere else. I think, Nell, I see a chance of getting to Brussels.

Now she wrote again to tell of the furtherance of this plan. But it was a belated letter—she had been so busy with excited preparations as well as being occupied with her job—and, as a result, Ellen had been feeling neglected. Ellen had even written to say that her feelings were hurt, that Charlotte had not shown enough confidence in her, that Charlotte's affections were variable. This provoked a retort from Charlotte: 'Believe me, though I was born in April, the month of cloud and sunshine, I am not changeful. My spirits are unequal, and sometimes I speak vehemently and sometimes I say nothing at all; but I have a steady regard for you, and if you will let the cloud and shower pass by, be sure the sun is always behind, obscured, but still existing.' It was true. Charlotte's friendship was faithful and lasting. But it was also true that Ellen, as was perhaps inevitable, was no longer the centre of



Charlotte's existence. New horizons were opening, new hopes, new possibilities.

Charlotte went home that Christmas with much on her mind, and many things yet to be settled. It had not been so easy to find a suitable school in Brussels. Somebody had recommended an institution at Lille. Would it be better if they went to Lille? For a few days there was uncertainty. And then a Mrs Jenkins, the wife of the chaplain to the British Embassy in Brussels, heard of a pensionnat which appeared in every way suitable: the Pensionnat Heger in the Rue d'Isabelle in Brussels. Enquiries were made and this pensionnat seemed to provide the ideal solution to all their problems.

There was much talk, discussion and excited speculation at Haworth Parsonage. The decision was made and the Pensionnat Heger it was to be. The three girls were all at home together that Christmas. There was a great deal to do, a great deal to be fitted in. Branwell was expected at any moment, it was hoped that Ellen would be able to come on a visit. Charlotte had many letters to write: to Brussels, to Lille, and to London. There were also clothes to make: chemises, nightgowns, pocket handkerchiefs, pockets. Other garments had to be mended; Charlotte's clothes were made of serviceable materials but they were always neat; she was particular about her appearance, and more particular now when the future held such exciting possibilities. Brussels was her 'promised land' and now at last, after crossing what had seemed to her 'a wilderness of time and space', it seemed that the land was in sight.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Charlotte and M. Heger*

Monsieur, the poor have not need of much to sustain them—they ask only for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. But if they are refused the crumbs they die of hunger. Nor do I, either, need much affection from those I love.

CHARLOTTE TO M. HEGER

#### I

**I**N February of 1842 the two girls were escorted to Brussels by their father. Mary Taylor and her brother Joe travelled with them and on the way the whole party stayed for a day or two in London, at the Chapter Coffee House, an old-fashioned inn in the city. They did not waste any time but spent the hours that they were in London in concentrated sightseeing. Besides climbing the dome of St. Paul's they visited various picture-galleries. Charlotte, who loved pictures and who had once aspired herself to become an artist, had years ago made a list of the pictures she longed most to see; now at last—at the age of twenty-five—she had a chance to study these masterpieces and it was she who urged on the others the importance of making the most of this cultural opportunity.

A day or two later they all arrived in Brussels. Mr Brontë at once took his daughters to the Pensionnat Heger. He himself stayed only one night, with Mr Jenkins, the chaplain to the British Embassy, and he hurried back to Haworth the next day. It was the first time he had been abroad and it was to be the last.

The Pensionnat Heger was a flourishing establishment, run with great skill and competence by a young Belgian woman, Mme. Heger. There were at the school about ninety to a hundred pupils, many of them day-girls, and in after years Charlotte described the school in great detail in two of her novels, *The Professor* and *Villette*. In these books we are also given vivid pen-portraits of both Mme. Heger and M. Heger, her husband. Though pregnant



with the essentials of truth, these portraits are coloured by Charlotte's over-heated imagination, by heartbreak and much brooding, by the complications of the emotional entanglement in which Charlotte, M. Heger and Mme. Heger were eventually to find themselves involved.

At a superficial valuation Mme. Heger was a serene, tactful, pleasant woman of thirty-six, attractive in appearance and friendly in manner. Her husband, Constantin Heger, who was professor at the Academy close by but also professor of rhetoric at the Pensionnat, was clever, eccentric, volcanic, excitable, but much under his wife's thumb. He was thirty-three and had been married before; but his first wife had died. Now he and his second wife already had three young children. They were a blameless married couple and the Pensionnat had an excellent reputation. Nothing was spared for the comfort and well-being of the pupils. Nobody was overworked, there was plenty of food. The chief difference from an English school, however, lay in the fact that at the Pensionnat there was a system of almost perpetual surveillance. Mme. Heger was said to have her spies. At any moment she herself might be seen peeping from behind a door, or watching with an eagle eye through the plate-glass partitions which separated the schoolrooms from the passages. She knew everything that was going on in the school. Her system was keen, deadly—some might almost say unscrupulous—and she left nothing to chance.

Most of the pupils were young Belgian girls belonging to respectable families and of Catholic upbringing. What these girls—smart, prosperous, carefree—thought of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, these two unusual and elderly pupils from England, can hardly be imagined. Mrs Gaskell tells us that the Brontës were considered to be 'wild and scared-looking'. Certainly the impression they made was not a flattering one. Charlotte's clothes, though neat, were dreary and unsmart, while Emily, for some unfortunate reason, clung obstinately to the ugly gigot sleeves which had gone out of fashion months before. Neither of the girls had the confidence or the social aplomb to make any effort to please. Instead they clung to each other, detached themselves with



a chilling insularity from all about them, and in their shyness and strangeness no doubt invited hostility from their fellow pupils. They slept together in a partition curtained off at the end of a long dormitory, and in the intervals for recreation during the daytime walked together in the garden, Emily leaning on Charlotte's arm, neither of them speaking for long periods on end, aloof in manner and completely unapproachable.

But in spite of the strangeness of this 'isolation in the midst of numbers', Charlotte was happy. She was censorious of the Belgians but she loved and admired Brussels. She liked, too, returning to the role of schoolgirl, of receiving orders instead of giving them; instead of being a teacher loaded with responsibility it was a relief and joy to be herself one of the taught. 'My present life is so delightful', she told Ellen, 'so congenial to my own nature, compared with that of a governess.'

The school hours were well occupied. From nine to twelve every morning there were classes, followed by a meal of bread and fruit in the refectory. From one to two the girls did fancy work while one of their number read aloud to the rest. There were more classes in the afternoons from two to four; at four the day-girls left and the boarders dined. From five to six there was recreation, followed by preparation for an hour before the evening *lecture pieuse*. Later there was another light meal and prayers before bedtime. It was a full day and Charlotte found the time passed 'too rapidly'. Both she and Emily had a passion for learning and they worked well. M. Heger saw at once that he had two very exceptional young women to deal with and he gave them special lessons in French and took a tremendous interest in their progress. Charlotte's response was immediate. M. Heger, with his brilliant intellect, his vivid eyes, heavy black moustache and still blacker hair, was a man after her own heart, the 'master' type which she had always revered. With much gusto, but in terms that were hardly flattering, she described her new master to Ellen:

He is professor of rhetoric, a man of power as to mind, but very choleric and irritable in temperament; a little black being, with a



face that varies in expression. Sometimes he borrows the lineaments of an insane tom-cat, sometimes those of a delirious hyena; occasionally, but very seldom, he discards these perilous attractions and assumes an air not above 100 degrees removed from mild and gentleman-like.

But in spite of this uncompromising portrait, it was these very attributes that she described which fascinated Charlotte. The dictatorship and the high-handedness, the tyranny and the passion: she took them as evidence of feeling, of warmth of heart and imagination, of the 'besetting sin of enthusiasm' which she had tried so often and pathetically to crush in her own nature. She knew, too, from the first that M. Heger was impressed by her talents. He was the first really intellectual man she had ever known and she felt intoxicated by his admiration, his interest. Here, in M. Heger, she felt that she had found a twin soul. She believed that she understood him from the first, had the measure of him. 'When he is very ferocious with me, I cry: that sets all things straight.' Underneath that outward ferocity of manner, that imperious will, she was convinced that there was gentleness. She could not have found a more congenial teacher.

Emily was not so impressed. She and M. Heger, so Charlotte told Ellen, 'don't draw well together at all'. Emily, although she worked hard, resented mastery. It was not in her nature to submit. M. Heger found her difficult, but he was amazed by her intellectual powers which he considered to be of a superior order to Charlotte's. He deplored her obstinacy but he was lost in admiration of her imagination. Her head for logic he considered to be rare in a woman. 'She should have been a man,' he said, 'a great navigator . . . her strong, imperious will could never have been daunted by opposition or difficulty; never have given way but with life.' Alternatively, he felt, she could have been a historian. Her powers of description were so vivid that she could have carried her readers with her, dominated them by her argument. Clearly M. Heger was impressed. Emily was a genius. There was no doubt of that. But all the same, as a person, he preferred Charlotte. Charlotte, in her anxiety that Emily should be happy in Brussels,



The Cornhill offices of Smith,  
Elder & Co.



The Chapter Coffee House,  
Paternoster Row.  
A drawing made in 1899





George Smith, painted by G. F. Warren in 1876.



was always unselfish and she allowed her younger sister to 'exercise a kind of unconscious tyranny' which M. Heger did not fail to notice and disapprove.

He himself was a born teacher and believed in adapting his methods to his pupils rather than vice versa. He decided to dispense with too much grammar in his French teaching of the two Brontës, and to concentrate on style and self-expression. They were to be taught 'from the ear and the heart' rather than by concentrated study of the rules of grammar. His passion for great literature was inspiring and contagious and the results of his teaching seem to have been remarkable. Charlotte and Emily, who knew little French when they first arrived, were soon writing essays of wide vocabulary and increasing vigour. When she was allowed to choose her own subjects Charlotte was faithful to the Old Testament. '*Elle était nourrie de la Bible*', M. Heger said. He was obviously delighted by his pupils' gifts, by their appetite for work and their responsiveness. He made the lessons increasingly difficult, getting the two girls to view their subjects from varying angles, to sift evidence, weigh up character, work out their own deductions.

It was all fascinating. Never before had Charlotte spent her time in pursuits so utterly suited to her temperament. Here at last was the cultural opportunity, the chance to develop her intellectual powers under expert tuition, for which she had always craved.

## II

After six months of life as pupils at the Pensionnat Heger the Brontës were asked to stay on for another half-year under different conditions. Charlotte, it was suggested, should be teacher of English at the school, while Emily could teach music to the younger pupils. No salaries were offered but board and lodging was to be free, and they would be allowed to continue their own studies in French and German.

Charlotte felt disposed at once to accept this suggestion. She was occasionally homesick but on the whole, as she told Ellen, she had borne 'a very valiant heart' in Brussels. Her opinion of



the Belgian character was no higher than it had been at the beginning. 'It is', she said, 'a character singularly cold, selfish, animal and inferior. They [the girls in the school] are very mutinous and difficult for the teachers to manage; and their principles are rotten to the core.' But this sweeping condemnation was largely due to religious intolerance, always a weakness in Charlotte's outlook, and to her own shyness which made understanding and friendship difficult. Even with people of their own race and creed the Brontës encountered difficulties during their stay in Brussels. Besides their friends the Taylors they had met the Taylors' cousins, the Dixons. There was also Mr Jenkins, chaplain to the Embassy, and his wife, and a Dr Wheelwright and his family who had come to live in the Rue Royale, partly for health reasons, and partly in order that the daughters might be educated at the Pensionnat. All these people made every effort to be friendly and hospitable. They invited Charlotte and Emily to their houses, and Charlotte and Emily went, but with not altogether happy results. For there is no doubt the Brontës were difficult visitors. Emily never spoke at all and poor Charlotte, spokeswoman for both, was too timid to appear anything but colourless and deferential. She had, too, an embarrassing habit, when conducting a conversation, of gradually turning her face away from the person she was talking to until, in the end, her back was almost turned. It is not surprising that invitations dropped off after a time. The strain, on both sides, was too great.

No such embarrassment, however, could have applied to Charlotte's relationship with the Taylors. Mary and Martha Taylor, now parlour boarders at the Château de Kockleberg, a college on the outskirts of Brussels, were old friends and, for their sake alone, Charlotte might have felt inclined to prolong her stay in Brussels. Their meetings were frequent and mutually enjoyable. Mary Taylor was blunt and outspoken by nature, but Charlotte had always accepted her criticisms meekly and admired her for her originality and her courage. Besides she had known her since school days and Charlotte was faithful. Mary was fond of Charlotte in return but her analytical brain probed into all



Charlotte's weaknesses and her affection was devoid of hero-worship. She frequently tried to fire Charlotte into greater independence, resenting the fact that Charlotte was so tied by her home life. She was mercilessly aware, too, of all Charlotte's fears and uncertainties, her doubts about the future. Even during this time at Brussels, so Mary told Mrs Gaskell years afterwards, Charlotte was watching the desperate husband-hunting of other women with a painful apprehension, fearful of ever following in their footsteps. She would, so Mary said, be full of qualms, of self-disparagement: 'My youth is leaving me,' she would say, 'I can never do better than I have done, and I have done nothing yet.' Why then, the practical Mary argued, not turn her attention seriously to finding a remunerative job, to earning more money? But this was foreign to Charlotte's nature; she despised money-getters and the north-country love of 'brass'. 'Though she patiently tolerated advice,' Mary said, 'she could always quietly put it aside, and do as she thought fit.'

The truth was, of course, that Charlotte, in spite of her nervousness and her outward appearance of humility, had a mind of her own and more strength of character than Mary gave her credit for. Certainly she had qualms about the future. A delicate father whose income ended with his death—an unreliable brother—her own unstable health: there were many rocks on which to founder. But she still clung to the idea of some day joining with her sisters in starting a school of their own. Probably she discussed her project with M. Heger and he gave her courage and counsel and encouragement. This was the goal for which she was still working, on which her hopes were set.

Altogether, for one reason and another, and not least probably the attraction of M. Heger's interest and tuition, Charlotte decided that it would be greatly to the benefit of their future plans if she and Emily remained some time longer in Brussels, and the Hegers' offer that they should stay on for some months as unpaid teachers was accepted. The term was nearly ended but Emily began work at once, giving piano lessons to all the young Wheelwrights. It is not known what Emily's reactions were to



the prospect of this still further prolonged exile from her beloved moors. Probably she accepted the plan with the doggedness which was customary to her, for she, too, hoped one day to start a school with her sisters. This miserable and drawn-out stay in Brussels could only be regarded as a necessary apprenticeship to be endured with all the stoicism of which she was capable.

The summer holidays came round and still she and Charlotte did not go home. Instead they stayed on, working and cramming by themselves, at the Pensionnat Heger. The school met again in the autumn and then their duties as teachers began in earnest. Charlotte girded herself for the fray once more: that uncongenial business of teaching which took such toll of her nervous strength. She would not accept any help from the Hegers; they offered that one or other of them should sit in the room during her classes, at any rate at the beginning, to help her to keep order. But she preferred to make the effort alone. Difficult though the pupils were, she knew that she must summon up resources of strength, courage and authority to subdue them. Even if they did not like her, she must make them respect her. She would do it, she decided, by firmness combined with gentleness, by never raising her voice or losing her temper. She would make herself into a good teacher by sheer will-power. It could be done and she would do it.

Just as she and Emily were settling down to their work and everything was going smoothly, the news of a shattering succession of deaths in their immediate circle burst on them tragically. The first to die was Willie Weightman, the young clergyman at home who had brought so much sunshine into their lives. Hardly had they read the letter telling of his death when, in late October, they heard of the grave illness of their young friend, Martha Taylor. The next morning Charlotte hurried round to the Château de Kockleberg, hoping to hear that Martha was better, only to be told that she had died in the night. It must have been a great shock. Martha, the lively, the captivating and the gay! Charlotte immortalized her afterwards as Jessie Yorke in *Shirley*: 'She lived through an April day; much loved was she, much



loving. She often, in her brief life, shed tears—she had frequent sorrows; she smiled between, gladdening whatever saw her. Her death was tranquil and happy in Rose's guardian arms. . . .'

Martha had died under her sister Mary's watching eyes. Mary had looked after her with unwearied devotion but, in her customary stoicism, she accepted her sister's death with an unemotional resignation. Charlotte and Emily met her a few days later and went with her to the Protestant cemetery where Martha was buried. After this six-mile walk the three girls spent the evening with the Dixon cousins where Mary was now staying. It was, so Mary told Ellen in a letter, a pleasant evening in spite of 'one not speaking at all, the other once or twice'. Mary's own future was hanging in the balance. She was happy with the Dixon cousins who were kind and affectionate, and who had accepted her as one of themselves, but inactivity never suited her. Perhaps partly to take her mind off her own griefs she decided in the end to leave Belgium and to go for a change to Germany.

### III

The Brontës, much distressed in mind by these tragic happenings, were still further troubled a few days later to hear of the illness of Aunt Branwell. As it sounded serious they decided to leave for England at once; but, before they had had time to start, a second letter reached them telling them that their aunt was dead. However, they decided to go just the same and, travelling day and night, they reached home when the funeral was over. Miss Branwell had died of internal obstruction, after a fortnight's illness.

Although it was a shock to her nieces it does not appear that they suffered emotionally by her death. The only member of the family who was at all attached to her was Branwell; Branwell had always been her favourite and it was he who watched by her in her last illness and wrote afterwards to his friend, Francis Grundy: 'I have now lost the guide and director of all the happy days connected with my childhood.' There is no doubt that



Branwell suffered considerably at this time, both by witnessing the death of his aunt 'who has been for twenty years as my mother', and also by the loss of Willie Weightman, 'one of my dearest friends'. He was in a depressed state of mind already, apart from these bereavements, having some months earlier lost the job on the railway at Luddenden Foot. Taking into consideration his behaviour there, and his complete unsuitability for the post, such a result was not surprising. He had, in the end, taken to deserting his post completely, leaving all duties to the porter. There had been an enquiry, the books were found to be in arrears, the margins of his memorandum book resplendent with sketches of popular pugilists and the text interlarded with verses about Lord Nelson and other heroes. Money too was missing, though fortunately Branwell himself was not held responsible for this. Altogether, however, the impression made on the officials who conducted the enquiry of Branwell's sense of responsibility was not a happy one and he was dismissed.

All the Brontë family were now at home again, Anne having temporarily left her situation at Thorp Green when her aunt died. It was a depressing homecoming for them all and Charlotte's spirits were low. She wrote to Ellen: 'Aunt, Martha Taylor, and Mr Weightman are now all gone; how dreary and void everything seems.' She was cheered, no doubt, when her father received a friendly and sympathetic letter from M. Heger, condoling with him over his bereavement and showing concern and interest for his daughters' futures. Before the arrival of this letter Charlotte had practically made up her mind that she would not return to Brussels. Emily, certainly, once escaped, had no intention of going back, and Charlotte, always a prey to her conscience, was persuading herself that her duty, too, was at home, looking after her father who had been depressed lately by failing eyesight. But this letter from M. Heger altered the situation and set her mind wavering once more. For M. Heger showed great sorrow and regret at the thought of parting with his two 'dear pupils'. He had for them, he said, an affection 'almost paternal', and he was upset to think of this abrupt ending to their work in Brussels.



If only, he said, they could come back for another year their education could be completed; they would finally lose their timidity as teachers and gain complete assurance: and at the end of the year the Pensionnat Heger would be glad to offer one, or both of them, a post. This was not a matter of self-interest, he added, but of affection. Charlotte and Emily, he felt, were 'part of our family'.

How Charlotte's heart must have warmed to read these appreciative, affectionate comments from the beloved teacher she so greatly admired. She longed to go back, but could not reconcile the longing with her conscience. Some of Charlotte's biographers have explained her hesitation by insisting that Charlotte was by this time in love with M. Heger and knew that by going back she would be returning to temptation and inevitable anguish of mind. They base this idea partly on a sentence in one of her letters to Ellen, written months later after she had left the Pensionnat: 'I returned to Brussels after Aunt's death against my conscience, prompted by what seemed then an irresistible impulse. I was punished for my selfish folly by a withdrawal for more than two years of happiness and peace of mind.' This statement certainly needs some explaining, but the obvious explanation is by no means certain to be the correct one. It is more likely that the immediate cause of Charlotte's hesitation to return to Brussels was concern for her father. Mr Brontë in fits of depression was inclined to drink too much, and Charlotte was the only member of the family who could influence him.

Whatever her real motives, Charlotte's conflict of mind was real and persistent. There passed a period of uncertainty while she tried to decide what she should do.

In the meantime life at the Parsonage fell back to its old routine. The girls were financially better off now as their aunt had bequeathed to them and another niece all her small capital, amounting to a little over three hundred pounds each. All the family were at home for Christmas, and Charlotte exchanged visits with Ellen. Branwell, in spite of his disgrace at Luddenden Foot, was recovering his spirits and Charlotte, loath still to believe that



his future was utterly hopeless, reinstated him in her favour. She sent flirtatious messages from him to Ellen: 'Branwell wants to know why you carefully exclude all mention of him when you particularly send your regards to every other member of the family. He desires to know whether and in what he has offended you, or whether it is considered improper for a young lady to mention the gentleman of a house.' Ellen sent messages in return. Branwell evidently still considered himself to be 'the gentleman of the house'. In spite of his own exaggerated and lurid tales of intemperance at Luddenden Foot, he could not by this time have been a confirmed drunkard or anything like it. His future employment was still a problem, but even that, too, was solved that Christmas by Anne obtaining the offer of a post for him with her own employers at Thorp Green as tutor to the Robinson boy. This was indeed a stroke of fortune. Branwell accepted the post and, as it turned out, remained in it for two and a half years before his final downfall.

The young Brontës' immediate plans for the future were in this way gradually sorting themselves out. Anne and Branwell were to go to Thorp Green. Emily was to remain at home, where she was happy and useful, to help with the housework. And Charlotte. . . .? There were other more remunerative offers of employment, but Charlotte's mind was finally made up for her when she received a kind letter from Mme. Heger herself, asking her to go back to Brussels and offering her, besides the free board and lodging, a salary of sixteen pounds a year.

## IV

Charlotte's return journey to Brussels was not without misadventures. She had rather half-heartedly tried to persuade Ellen to accompany her but finally she went alone. Her train to London was late arriving, and she did not reach the city until ten o'clock at night. At the thought of arriving at the Chapter Coffee-House at that hour, her courage wavered, and she decided it would be a lesser evil to try to board the ship, which was not due to sail until



the morning. As described so graphically in *Villette*, she took a cab to the wharf and got a waterman to row her to the boat. After crossing the river in the darkness she was at first, to her consternation, refused leave to come on board. As so often in moments of stress she summoned dignity and courage, asked to speak to someone in higher authority, and was finally allowed to board the ship and was given a sleeping-berth for the night. The following evening she arrived back once more at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels. Mme Heger, so she told Ellen, received her with great kindness. There was at this time evidently no shadow of uneasiness in her relationship with M. Heger's wife. Charlotte's only reaction to her experiences, as pictured to Ellen, was exhaustion after the journey: 'I am still tired with the continued excitement of three days' travelling. I had no accident, but of course some anxiety.'

After a few weeks she had settled down again to the routine of life at the Pensionnat Heger, but somehow this second visit was, from the beginning, not so satisfactory as the first. She was, of course, much more lonely. Though in that first year she had complained of 'isolation in the midst of numbers' she had at least had Emily with whom to share that isolation. Now she had nobody.

Just at first things did not seem so bad. The Hegers were both very friendly, and she was invited by them to share their sitting-room; this, she decided, she could not do, without invading their family privacy, but the invitation pleased her. There was a carnival in Brussels to which she and one of the pupils were taken by M. Heger. Besides her teaching she had time for her own work and she continued her study in German. She also gave English lessons to M. Heger and his brother-in-law, occasions for gaiety as their efforts at English pronunciation were so amusing and would, so she told Ellen, make her 'laugh to all eternity'. But, in spite of these alleviations to her loneliness, there is in this letter to Ellen, written in March of that year 1843, a hint of what was to come:

I ought to consider myself well off, and to be thankful for my good fortune. I hope I am thankful; and if I could always keep up my



spirits, and never feel lonely, or long for companionship, or friendship, or whatever they call it, I should do very well.

In her isolation Charlotte no doubt turned more and more to M. Heger for this companionship, friendship or 'whatever they call it' which she so much valued. Mary Taylor, writing to Ellen from Germany about this time, said:

I have heard from Charlotte since her arrival; she seems *content* at least, but fear her sister's absence will have a bad effect. When people have so little amusement they cannot afford to lose *any*.

But Charlotte, whatever her lot, felt that it was superior to Mary's and she, too, made Ellen her confidante:

I have had two letters from Mary. She does not tell me she has been ill, and she does not complain; but her letters are not the letters of a person in the enjoyment of great happiness. She has nobody to be good to her as M. Heger is to me; to lend her books, to converse with her sometimes, etc.

It was these little attentions from M. Heger, the intellectual intimacy which flourished between them, which made Charlotte's loneliness bearable. Apart from M. Heger, she disliked nearly everybody in the school, and a great deal of her spare time was spent alone. She did, however, go out sometimes to visit her friends in the town. The Dixons, the Jenkins and the Wheelwrights were all kind to her and there seems no doubt that socially she got on better without Emily. Emily's frozen silences had paralysed the good intentions of her hosts, but Charlotte on her own was better liked. Laetitia Wheelwright, one of the doctor's five daughters, had attracted Charlotte from the first, partly because of the way she had stood aloof in class, looking about her at the 'foreign' students with a slightly contemptuous air which was, as Charlotte said, 'so very English'. She and Laetitia, perhaps partly on the strength of this, struck up a firm friendship and Laetitia, in after years, was able to throw interesting light on Charlotte's life in Brussels.

That winter the weather was cold and severe. Charlotte suffered



physically, with numbed and swollen hands and feet, which she endured stoically. In spite of her gradually increasing loneliness, she continually cheered herself by thinking how much worse off she had been as governess to Mrs Sidgwick or Mrs White. But all the same life was not coming up to her expectations. The strain of teaching, as always, sapped her vitality and, although she had triumphed over her pupils' intractability and made herself by will-power and gentle firmness into a good teacher, it was not really her *métier*. But what was the alternative? It annoyed her intensely when Ellen wrote suggesting slyly that some other interest than her work was keeping her in Brussels and that a budding romance was rumoured by people at home. For, as Charlotte reasoned a little bitterly to herself, what chance had she of romance?

If these charitable people knew the total seclusion of the life I lead—that I never exchange a word with any other man than Monsieur Heger, and seldom indeed with him—they would perhaps cease to suppose that any such chimerical and groundless notion had influenced my proceedings. Have I said enough to clear myself of so silly an imputation? Not that it is a crime to marry, or to wish to be married; but it is an imbecility, which I reject with contempt, for women, who have neither fortune nor beauty, to make marriage the principal object of their wishes and hopes, and the aim of all their actions; not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive, and that they had better be quiet, and think of other things than wedlock.

Part of the reason for this depression of mind and spirit was obviously due to a subtle change, of which she was becoming increasingly and uneasily aware, in her relationship with the Hegers. The English lessons to M. Heger and his brother-in-law had been stopped. M. Heger spent less and less of his time with her. Mme. Heger, who had seemed so pleasant and amiable at the beginning of the year, and who had written her that kind letter at Christmas time asking her to come back to Brussels, was now quite different in manner and much less friendly.

What could have gone wrong? Looking back now at the



situation from a dispassionate distance of years, one can see all too clearly what had happened. Charlotte had made the fatal mistake of putting all her emotional eggs in one basket, of fastening all her attention and affection on the one person at the Pensionnat whom she really admired, of showing her feelings too plainly. It was tactless of her, of course: tactless, short-sighted and naïve. But Charlotte had no worldly wisdom where her own feelings were concerned. She had little knowledge of the conventions and it was against her nature to dissemble. Had not she spoken once of her 'besetting sin of enthusiasm', and confided to Ellen: 'If I like people it is my nature to tell them so.' Her feeling now for that most understanding man, M. Heger, her master, was innocent, and it never dawned on her that any human being in the world could view it in any other light. One can readily understand, therefore, her dismay, her unhappiness, her increasing panic, when she found that this relationship of which she asked and expected so little, but which meant so much to her, was changing before her eyes and gradually being undermined.

By May of that year her depression had grown to a weariness of spirit which is revealed in all her letters. She is, so she tells Branwell, growing increasingly 'misanthropic and sour'. Her tirades against the other inmates of the Pensionnat became more pronounced, more sweeping and bitter: 'They have not intellect or politeness or good-nature or good-feeling.' Her own feelings, she hints, are becoming atrophied. 'One wearies from day to day of caring nothing, fearing nothing, liking nothing, hating nothing, being nothing, doing nothing—yes, I teach and sometimes get red in the face with impatience at their stupidity. But don't think I ever scold or fly into a passion. If I spoke warmly, as warmly as I sometimes used to do at Roe Head, they would think me mad. Nobody ever gets into a passion here. Such a thing is not known. The phlegm that thickens their blood is too gluey to boil. They are very false in their relations with each other, but they rarely quarrel, and friendship is a folly they are unacquainted with.' And then, still more revealingly: 'The black swan, M. Heger, is the only sole veritable exception to this rule (for Madame, always cool and



always reasoning, is not quite an exception). But I rarely speak to Monsieur now, for not being a pupil I have little or nothing to do with him. From time to time he shows his kind-heartedness by loading me with books, so that I am still indebted to him for all the pleasure or amusement I have. Except for the total want of companionship I have nothing to complain of.'

'From time to time he shows his kind-heartedness by loading me with books. . . . ' One can guess that the intervals between these little acts of warm-heartedness which meant so much to her, were growing gradually longer. By the end of May, in a letter to Emily, her bitterness is more pronounced:

I am richly off for companionship in these parts. Of late days M. and Mme. Heger rarely speak to me and I really don't pretend to care a fig for anybody else in the establishment. You are not to suppose by that expression that I am under the influence of *warm* affection for Mme. Heger. I am convinced she does not like me—why, I can't tell, nor do I think she herself has any definite reason for the aversion; but for one thing, she cannot comprehend why I do not make intimate friends of Mesdames Blanche, Sophie and Haussé. M. Heger is wonderously influenced by Madame, and I should not wonder if he disapproves very much of my unamiable want of sociability. He has already given me a brief lecture on universal *bienveillance*, and, perceiving that I don't improve in consequence, I fancy he has taken to considering me as a person to be left alone—left to the error of her ways; and consequently he has in a great measure withdrawn the light of his countenance, and I get on from day to day in a Robinson-Crusoe-like condition—very lonely. That does not signify. In other respects I have nothing substantial to complain of, nor is even this a cause for complaint. Except the loss of M. Heger's goodwill (if I have lost it) I care for none of 'em.

It was all defiance. She hated being ostracized. Her spirits grew gradually lower and by August, with the thought of the lonely vacation ahead of her, she was writing to Ellen; 'Earth and heaven are dreary and empty to me at this moment.'



One wonders why Charlotte, with money at her disposal left by her aunt, did not return home for the holidays instead of staying alone in Brussels for that disastrous summer vacation. Perhaps she wanted to keep the money for an uncertain future, perhaps it had already all been invested, or perhaps—more simply—she was afraid of the journey. Whatever her motives, she stayed, although longing to go home.

Her isolation now was appalling. The Hegers went away for a seaside holiday and took their children with them. The Dixons and the Wheelwrights by this time had left Brussels and Charlotte was left by herself at the Pensionnat, her only companion an uncongenial French teacher whom she despised and disliked. In spite of her shyness Charlotte was really sociable by inclination and she became increasingly morbid under this enforced solitude. It had been her habit for some time to go alone on Sundays to the German and English chapels in the district, and to take solitary walks in the famous *allée défendue*, a secluded part of the school garden. Now, in the enervating summer heat, she took to wandering as well in the streets of Brussels—long, solitary, exhausting pilgrimages which wore down her spirits still further and only served to increase her misery. She was, as she told Ellen, very homesick. Cut off from all the sustaining relationships of her home life, she must secretly have brooded for long hours over that one tormenting relationship in Brussels which now seemed to be going so sadly awry. Her nights were bad and, always prone to insomnia, she now hardly slept at all. There is in *Villette* a vivid and heartfelt description of loneliness and nervous collapse, which is probably a true account of Charlotte's own experiences at this time:

How long were the September days! How silent, how lifeless! How vast and void seemed the desolate premises! How gloomy the forsaken garden—grey now with the dust of a town summer departed. Looking forward at the commencement of those eight weeks, I hardly knew how I was to live to the end. My spirits had



long been gradually sinking; now that the prop of employment was withdrawn, they went down fast. Even to look forward was not to hope. . . .

She became physically ill for a time and took to her bed with a fever. It was something of the same nervous breakdown which had overtaken her years before, at Miss Wooler's school; the same agonizing depression and the acute mental suffering. The nights were terrible: the hallucinations and the total absence of sleep. If we can believe that her experiences were the same as Lucy Snowe's in *Villette*—as seems probable from Mrs Gaskell's description—the servant at the Pensionnat, growing alarmed, begged Charlotte to call in a doctor. But Charlotte did not want a doctor; knowing the problems of her own heart, she probably felt that no doctor could cure her.

As soon as the fever had lessened, she left her bed and resumed her restlessness wandering in the streets of Brussels. But the load on her mind was more than she could bear alone; and one evening on an impulse, passing the church of Ste. Gudule just as the evening service was beginning, she joined the congregation and afterwards stayed for confession. It was a strange thing for her to have done. After her tirades against the Roman Catholic religion she now, in her agony of low spirits, sought comfort from Catholic rites. She poignantly described this episode in *Villette* and she also wrote about it in a letter to Emily. The episode was, however, discreetly suppressed by Mrs Gaskell and it is not mentioned in her biography.

There is, of course, a mystery attached to this confession which can never be fully explained. After revealing to the priest that she was a Protestant, Charlotte persuaded him, after hesitation on his part, to hear her confession:

I said [these words are from *Villette*] I was perishing for a word of advice or an accent of comfort. I had been living for some weeks quite alone; I had been ill; I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight.

Did she then go on to confess her love for M. Heger, a married man? Many Brontë students are inclined to think so, but this is by

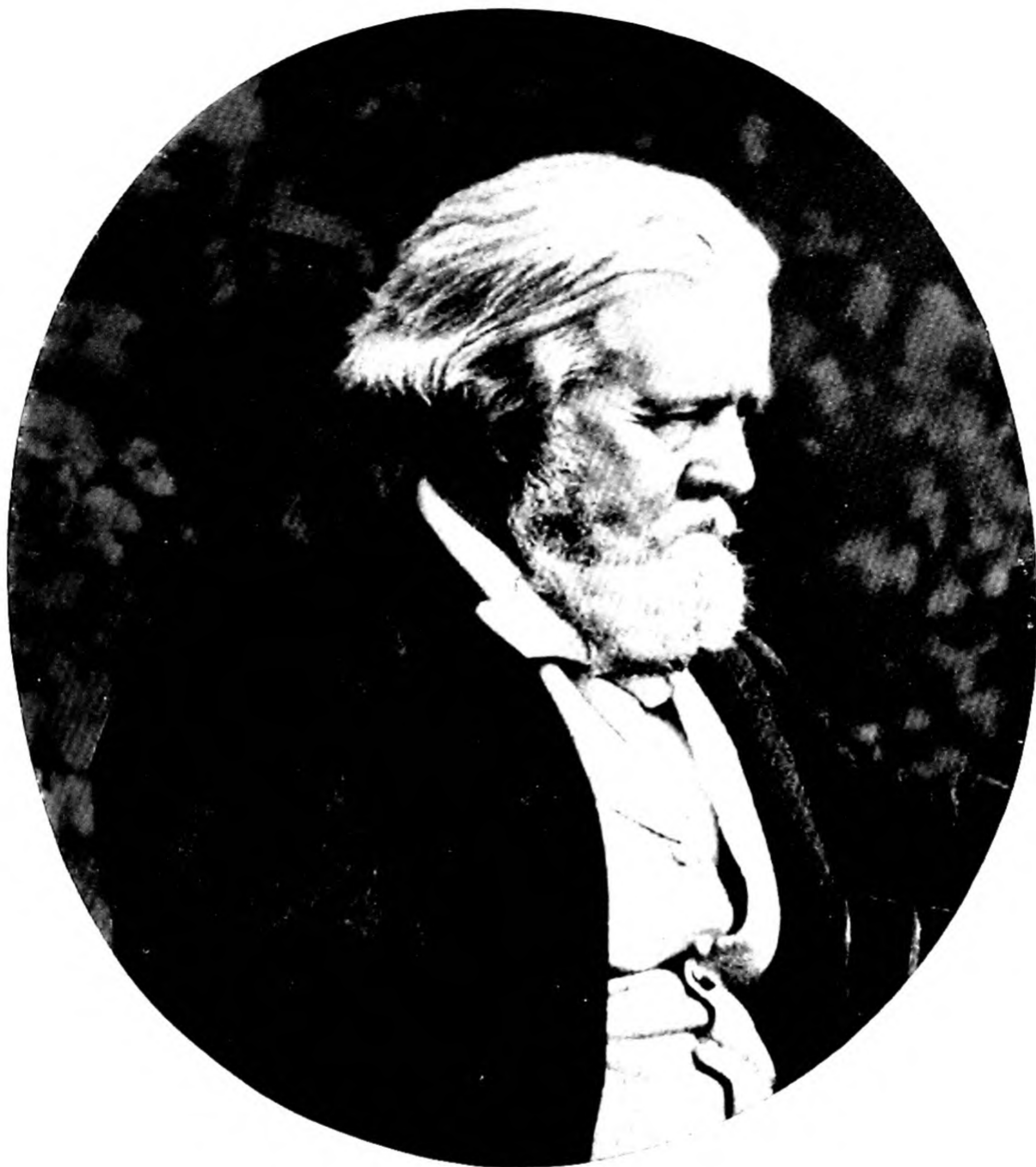


no means the universal opinion. It is much more likely that Charlotte, whose conscience about her feeling for M. Heger was in all probability clear and untroubled, confessed only to depression, loneliness, sickness of mind and body, and uncertainty over the future. It was more likely to have been an outpouring of nervous strain than a real confession. The description of the episode to Emily, very much on the surface and even flippant, tells us very little. Charlotte wrote that she took a fancy 'to make a real confession to see what it was like' and added:

The adventure stops there, and I hope I shall never see the priest again. I think you had better not tell papa of this. He will not understand that it was only a freak, and will perhaps think that I am going to turn Catholic.

But in *Villette*, disguised as Lucy Snowe, Charlotte is more honest and revealing, and is willing to admit that this strange episode was much more than a whim, a 'freak'; that it was instead the impulse born of a deep-seated craving for human comfort and that the experience did indeed bring her the comfort she needed. 'The mere relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient, yet consecrated—the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not be again diffused—had done me good. I was already solaced.'

By the time the autumn term started and the school reassembled, her physical health seems to have been better. Her homesickness, however, was growing on her daily and she could not fail to be uncomfortably aware of the undercurrent of hostility steadily increasing between Mme. Heger and herself. Mrs Gaskell puts this estrangement down to their religious differences; but Mrs Gaskell was discreet when it suited her and this explanation is now known not to have been the true one. It is far more probable that Mme. Heger, aware of Charlotte's unsuitable devotion to her husband, was becoming increasingly impatient and annoyed. Charlotte made it so very obvious that the only person in the Pensionnat she cared about, or cared to talk to, was the Professor. Mme. Heger



William Smith Williams





William Makepeace Thackeray. From an oil sketch by Samuel Laurence



was only human. She was probably jealous. She had no cause to distrust her husband but she did not understand Charlotte; and the one thing that she wanted to avoid in her high-class establishment, run on the oiled wheels of incessant watchfulness, was an emotional scene.

It is probable then that when, early in October, Charlotte went to Mme. Heger and told her that she wished to give notice and to return home, Mme. Heger was relieved and thankful. Even Charlotte herself was clear-sightedly aware of Mme. Heger's reactions. As she told Ellen: 'If it had depended on her I should certainly have soon been at liberty.' But as things turned out, M. Heger decreed otherwise. Probably blissfully unaware of the undercurrent of tension between his wife and Charlotte, liking Charlotte, and unwilling to lose a good English teacher, he sent for her and 'pronounced with vehemence his decision that I should not leave'. And Charlotte, pleased by this flattering insistence on his part, and certainly unwilling to rouse him to anger, agreed to stay a little while longer.

In this way the agony was prolonged and decision postponed, but such a miserable state of affairs could not last. Though outwardly calm and polite towards Charlotte, Mme. Heger, underneath, was disapproving and determined. By careful plans and ruses—for which one cannot blame her—she kept Charlotte and her husband apart for the rest of the term. In more ways than one it was a gloomy winter. Fires at the Pensionnat were not started until the season was well advanced and Charlotte suffered from colds and headaches. There was little to comfort her, and to relieve her pent-up feelings she scribbled a note in an exercise book which is revealing of her state of mind:

I am very cold—there is no fire—I wish I were at home with papa—Branwell—Emily—Anne and Tabby—I am tired of being among foreigners—it is a dreary life—especially as there is only one person in this house worthy of being liked—also another, who seems a rosy sugar plum, but I know her to be coloured chalk.

Although at moments now Charlotte suspected the cause of





William Makepeace Thackeray. From an oil sketch by Samuel Laurence



sad and low in spirit. Gratitude alone dictated that she could not leave him without a message of thankfulness and goodwill.

It was probably this parting with M. Heger that was at the root of all Charlotte's subsequent heartbreak. For verification of this we must turn to *Villette*. In *Villette* Lucy Snowe is faced with the prospect of parting with her loved M. Paul and the fear of being unable to bid him a private farewell owing to the machinations of the jealous Mme. Beck. The situation in the book is, of course, by no means identical with the situation in real life. In the book Mme. Beck has no legitimate claim on M. Paul—she is not his wife, and M. Paul is in love with Lucy. But the elements of similarity are there, and there are one or two scenes in *Villette* which do not fit the situation of the story but are much more like scenes to fit the real-life situation in Brussels.

A cordial word from his lips, or a gentle look from his eyes, would do me good, for all the span of life that remained to me; it would be comfort in the last strait of loneliness; I would take it—I would taste the elixir, and pride should not spill the cup.

The interview would be short, of course: he would say to me just what he had said to each of the assembled pupils; he would take and hold my hand two minutes; he would touch my cheek with his lips for the first, last, only time—and then—no more. Then, indeed, the final parting, then the wide separation, the great gulf I could not pass to go to him—across which, haply, he would not glance, to remember me.

He took my hand in one of his, with the other he put back my bonnet; he looked into my face, his luminous smile went out, his lips expressed something almost like the wordless language of a mother who finds a child greatly and unexpectedly changed, broken with illness, or worn out by want. A check supervened.

'Paul, Paul!' said a woman's hurried voice behind, 'Paul, come into the salon; I have yet a great many things to say to you—conversation for the whole day—and so has Victor; and Josef is here. Come, Paul, come to your friends.'

Madame Beck, brought to the spot by vigilance or an inscrutable instinct, pressed so near, she almost thrust herself between me and M. Emanuel. 'Come, Paul!' she reiterated, her eye grazing me with



its hard ray like a steel stylet. She pushed against her kinsman. I thought he receded; I thought he would go. Pierced deeper than I could endure, made now to feel what defied suppression, I cried—  
'My heart will break!'

My heart will break! It is the authentic cry of Charlotte's own despair as she saw those last precious moments of parting with her beloved friend being snatched from her. Something like this scene must have taken place in the Pensionnat Heger during those last hours before Charlotte left Brussels for ever. In some way she must have been made to feel that she had been wrong to imagine that M. Heger no longer took any interest in her, that he had 'withdrawn the light of his countenance'. There is no evidence to confirm the suggestion made by Isabel Clarke in her interesting book *Haworth Parsonage* that at this parting M. Heger confessed his love. Such a possibility in view of after events seems extremely unlikely. But M. Heger was emotional by nature, he liked sentimental scenes, and he was no doubt flattered by Charlotte's unconcealed adoration.

The scene with Mme. Beck continues:

When M. Paul answered deeply, harshly and briefly—'*Laissez moi!*' in the grim sound I felt a music strange, strong, but life-giving.

'*Laissez moi!*' he repeated, his nostrils opening, and his facial muscles all quivering as he spoke.

'But this will never do', said Madame with sternness. More sternly rejoined her kinsman—'*Sortez d'ici!*'

'I will send for Père Silas; on the spot I will send for him' she threatened pertinaciously.

'*Femme!*' cried the Professor, not now in his deep tones, but in his highest and most excited key, '*Femme! sortez à l'instant!*'

He was roused, and I loved him in his wrath with a passion beyond what I had yet felt.

'What you do is wrong', pursued Madame, 'it is an act characteristic of men of your unreliable, imaginative temperament; a step impulsive, injudicious, inconsistent—a proceeding vexatious, and not estimable in the view of persons of steadier and more resolute character.'



'You know not what I have of steady and resolute in me', said he, 'but you shall see; the event shall teach you. Modeste', he continued, less fiercely, 'be gentle, be pitying, be a woman; look at this poor face, and relent. You know I am your friend, and the friend of your friends; in spite of your taunts, you well and deeply know I may be trusted. Of sacrificing myself, I make no difficulty, but my heart is pained by what I see; it *must* have and give solace. *Leave me!*'

This time, in the '*leave me*', there was an intonation so bitter, and so imperative, I wondered that even Madame Beck herself could for one moment delay obedience; but she stood firm; she gazed upon him dauntless; she met his eye, forbidding and fixed as stone. She was opening her lips to retort; I saw over all M. Paul's face a quick rising light and fire; I can hardly tell how he managed the movement; it did not seem violent; it kept the form of courtesy; he gave his hand; it scarce touched her, I thought; she ran, she whirled from the room; she was gone, and the door shut, in one second.

The flash of passion was all over very soon. He smiled as he told me to wipe my eyes; he waited quietly till I was calm, dropping from time to time a stilling, solacing word. Ere long I sat beside him once more myself—re-assured, not desperate, nor yet desolate; not friendless, not hopeless, not sick of life, and seeking death.

'It made you very sad then to lose your friend?' said he.

'It kills me to be forgotten, monsieur', I said. 'All these weary days I have not heard from you one word, and I was crushed with the possibility, growing to certainty, that you would depart without saying farewell!'

'Must I tell you what I told Modeste Beck—that you do not know me? Must I show and teach you my character? You *will* have proof that I can be a firm friend? Without clear proof this hand will not be still in mine, it will not trust my shoulder as a safe stay? Good. The proof is ready. I come to justify myself.'

This parting was a sweet pain to Charlotte. With all its old intensity her gratitude, her devotion, her belief in M. Heger's warm-hearted interest in herself and her affairs, came pouring back into her heart in an almost overwhelming flood. How she had misunderstood him, maligned him, doubted his kindness, under-estimated his friendship. And now it was too late. She was



going home to England. In all probability she would never return, never set eyes on him again.

From Haworth in January of that year 1844, she wrote to Ellen:

I suffered much before I left Brussels. I think, however long I live, I shall not forget what the parting with M. Heger cost me; it grieved me so much to grieve him, who has been so true, kind and disinterested a friend.

## VII

On July 29th, 1913, *The Times* published four intimate and revealing letters written from Haworth by Charlotte Brontë to M. Heger during the years 1844 and 1845.

Although for many years there had been rumours, faint but persistent, that Charlotte had been in love with M. Heger, there had, up to that moment, been little evidence to support this theory. Mrs Gaskell in her biography had been discretion itself and never so much as hinted at the possibility. One or two braver souls had suggested that there must have been something more in the relationship than had yet been revealed. But most of the better-known biographers—Clement Shorter, Ernest Dimnet and May Sinclair among them—went to great lengths not only to dismiss the possibility, but also to pour discredit on the suggestion.

It was therefore a stupendous shock to the whole literary world, and particularly to a great many Brontë students, when these letters of Charlotte's were suddenly published.

The history of the letters up to that moment of publication in 1913 is a strange and fascinating one. The letters had been written to M. Heger and he had torn them up and put them in the waste-paper basket. So little did he value them that on the corner of one of them he had scribbled the address of a bootmaker. They had been retrieved from the waste-paper basket by Mme. Heger who, aware and disapproving of Charlotte's exaggerated devotion for her husband, felt that she had better keep them as evidence in case of future trouble. She therefore pieced them together and



put them away in the bottom of her jewel-case where they remained until after Charlotte's death.

When Mrs Gaskell came some months later to Brussels to collect information for Charlotte's biography, she was shown the letters. The proof of this lies in the fact that Mrs Gaskell actually quoted from one or two of the letters, carefully choosing the most innocuous and unrevealing sentences. Mme. Heger, now more than ever incensed against Charlotte by the publication of *Villette* with its disturbingly true-to-life story of Lucy Snowe and M. Paul, refused to see Mrs Gaskell. She must therefore have given the letters to M. Heger to show her.

What M. Heger felt when he discovered that the letters which he had thrown away years before had been so carefully preserved by his wife, we are not told. We are, however, given hints of Mrs Gaskell's embarrassment and uneasiness when she found herself confronted with this unwelcome correspondence of Charlotte's. She was not sure what the letters revealed. Her biography of Charlotte, a wonderful book and a masterpiece, errs on the side of whitewashing its heroine at all costs. An ambiguous relationship with M. Heger, a married man, was the last thing she could have hinted at without distorting her whole picture. And besides this she was placed in a difficult position, as Charlotte's widower and father were still alive and she had been asked to write the biography by Mr Brontë himself. All things considered, and although she must have realized the importance of the evidence she was suppressing, and must have guessed that such a suppression would falsify and spoil her book, she decided to suppress it.

But, as events turned out, the secret was not to rest there. The letters went back into the jewel-case and there they remained for another thirty years until Mme. Heger herself died. The jewel-case and its contents then came into the hands of Mme. Heger's daughter, Louise. Louise had already seen the letters—her mother had shown them to her—and now she took them to her father and asked what should be done with them. M. Heger put them into the waste-paper basket for the second time. This discon-



certed Louise: the letters had been preserved for so long; apart from anything else it was obvious that they had a great literary interest, it seemed a great pity to throw them away. So, like her mother, she retrieved them from the waste-paper basket and, after her father's death, showed them to her brother, Professor Paul Heger. There seems to have been a family council to decide what had better be done and it was agreed that the letters should not be destroyed. In 1913 the Hegers brought the letters to England and consulted a literary friend, Mr Marion Spielmann, who—aware at once of the enormous value and interest of the letters—advised that they should be published. The Hegers agreed, a translation of the text (by Mr Spielmann) was published in *The Times*,<sup>1</sup> and the letters themselves were presented to the British Museum.

But can these letters, which Charlotte wrote to M. Heger after she left Brussels, truthfully be called love-letters?

It is true certainly that they contain a passionate intensity of feeling. There are sentences which, even reading them now after a hundred years, convey such depths of emotional anguish that it seems wrong and shameful that anyone but the person to whom they were addressed should ever have been allowed to set eyes on them.

At first Charlotte wrote calmly. There had, it is true, been other letters before the first of the four kept by the Hegers, but in July 1844 Charlotte is trying to be patient and philosophical:

Ah, Monsieur! I once wrote you a letter that was less than reasonable, because sorrow was at my heart; but I shall do so no more. I shall try to be selfish no longer; and even while I look upon your letters as one of the greatest felicities known to me, I shall await the receipt of them in patience until it pleases you and suits you to send me any. Meanwhile, I may well send you a little letter from time to time—you have authorized me to do so.

She goes on to tell M. Heger about her life—ordinary day-to-day details which are customary among friends: she writes of

<sup>1</sup> Extracts from these letters are here reprinted by kind permission of *The Times* and Dr Percy Spielmann.



her fears of forgetting French, of the situation which has been offered her in a large school in Manchester, of the difficulty of leaving her father, of her plans for a school at Haworth, of her longing to write and her fears over her eyesight. In a postscript she adds that she wishes greatly that M. Heger will answer this letter and finishes:

Once more good-bye, Monsieur; it hurts to say good-bye even in a letter. Oh, it is certain that I shall see you again one day—it must be so—for as soon as I shall have earned enough money to go to Brussels I shall go there, and I shall see you again, if only for a moment.

This letter, and the next, give the impression that Charlotte believes in the friendship revealed by M. Heger at their parting, and that therefore she takes for granted that he will be glad to hear from her. Her second letter written in 'high glee' in October 1844 is to be delivered personally: Charlotte has discovered to her delight that Mary Taylor's brother is going to Brussels and will take her letter with him—

I am not going to write a long letter; in the first place, I have not the time—it must leave at once; and then, I am afraid to worry you. I would only ask of you if you heard from me at the beginning of May and again in the month of August? For six months I have been awaiting a letter from Monsieur—six months' waiting is very long, you know. However, I do not complain, and I shall be richly rewarded for a little sorrow if you will now write a letter and give it to this gentleman, or to his sister, who will hand it to me without fail.

I shall be satisfied with the letter however brief it be, only do not forget to tell me of your health, Monsieur, and how Madame and the children are, and the governesses and pupils. . . .

Farewell, Monsieur; I am depending on soon having your news. The idea delights me, for the remembrance of your kindness will never fade from my memory, and as long as that remembrance endures, the respect with which it has inspired me will endure likewise.

Your very devoted pupil,  
C. Brontë



Beyond a fervency of language which was natural to Charlotte when her enthusiasm was roused, there is nothing in this letter in the least unsuitable. Why M. Heger could not have sat down and written her a friendly letter in the same strain—a letter which would have entirely satisfied her—we shall never know. Fully aware as he was of the circumstances of Charlotte's life—of her family worries, her need of counsel and advice, her intellectual starvation and her poverty—it would have been a kindness on his part to reply, and one not requiring much effort. Perhaps, however, her previous letters had sown seeds of uneasiness in his mind. Or perhaps his wife was anxious to put an end to the correspondence. Whatever his reason, he did not write. He ignored the carefully delivered letter and all Charlotte's requests. There was no friendly reassurance, no letter or note or message of any kind from Brussels. Nothing but a baffling, frustrating, inexplicable silence.

It was not until this happened that Charlotte became distraught. She had set such store on the prospect of a reply. One has only to read and re-read of Lucy Snowe's feelings in *Villette* to realize what letters meant to Charlotte:

A letter! The shape of a letter similar to that had haunted my brain in its very core for seven days past. I had dreamed of a letter last night.

My hour of torment was the post hour. Unfortunately I knew it too well, and tried as vainly as assiduously to cheat myself of that knowledge; dreadful the rack of expectation, and the sick collapse of disappointment which daily preceded and followed upon the well recognized ring.

The letter—the well-beloved letter—would not come, and it was all of sweetness in life I had to look for.

A letter would have revived and refreshed her affectionate heart. M. Heger had been her friend; he had instructed her to write to him, talked once of his 'affection almost paternal', looked upon her nearly as one of his family. Why, then, did he now ignore her existence? Why, why did he not write?



Her third letter is a cry of anguish from a despairing heart:

Mr Taylor has returned. I asked him if he had a letter for me. 'No; nothing.' 'Patience,' said I, 'his sister will be here soon.' Miss Taylor has returned. 'I have nothing for you from M. Heger', says she, 'neither letter nor message.'

Having realized the meaning of these words, I said to myself what I should say to another similarly placed: 'You must be resigned, and above all do not grieve at a misfortune which you have not deserved.' I strove to restrain my tears, to utter no complaint.

But when one does not complain, when one seeks to dominate oneself with a tyrant's grip, the faculties start into rebellion, and one pays for external calm with an internal struggle that is almost unbearable.

Day and night I find neither rest nor peace. If I sleep I am disturbed by tormenting dreams in which I see you, always severe, always incensed against me.

Forgive me then, Monsieur, if I adopt the course of writing to you again. How can I endure life if I make no effort to ease its sufferings? I know that you will be irritated when you read this letter. You will say once more that I am neurotic—that I have black thoughts, etc. So be it, Monsieur; I do not seek to justify myself; I submit to every sort of reproach. All I know is that I cannot, that I will not, resign myself to lose wholly the friendship of my master. I would rather suffer the greatest physical pain than always have my heart lacerated by smarting regrets.

If my master withdraws his friendship from me entirely I shall be altogether without hope: if he gives me a little—just a little—I shall be satisfied—happy; I shall have a reason for living on, for working.

Monsieur, the poor have not need of much to sustain them—they ask only for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. But if they are refused the crumbs they die of hunger. Nor do I, either, need much affection from those I love. I should not know what to do with a friendship entire and complete—I am not used to it. But you showed me of yore a *little* interest, when I was your pupil in Brussels, and I hold on to the maintenance of that *little* interest—I hold on to it as I would hold on to life.

There is more of the letter in the same strain: the same desperate



pleading, the same panic-stricken fear that a friendship which she valued so much was forever lost to her.

M. Heger evidently did not answer this letter. None of his replies have survived but, on evidence of the Heger family, it seems that it must have been then that he wrote to Charlotte, cautioning her for excessive enthusiasm and restricting her letters to one every six months.

The last remaining letter of Charlotte's is written in November of 1845. Again there are the same agonized protestations of affection, of longing, of despair.

Monsieur,

The six months of silence have run their course. It is now the 18th of November; my last letter was dated (I think) the 18th of May. I may therefore write to you without failing in my promise.

The summer and autumn seemed very long to me. . . . I tell you frankly that I have tried meanwhile to forget you, for the remembrance of a person whom one thinks never to see again and whom, nevertheless, one greatly esteems, frets too much the mind. . . . I have done everything; I have sought occupations; I have denied myself absolutely the pleasure of speaking about you—even to Emily; but I have been able to conquer neither my regrets nor my impatience. . . . Why cannot I have just as much friendship for you as you for me—neither more nor less? Then should I be so tranquil, so free—I could keep silence then for ten years without an effort. . . .

Monsieur, I have a favour to ask of you: when you reply to this letter, speak to me a little of yourself, not of me; for I know that if you speak of me it will be to scold me, and this time I would see your kindly side. Speak to me therefore of your children. . . . Tell me something also of the School, of the pupils, of the governesses. . . . To write to an old pupil cannot be a very interesting occupation for you, I know; but for me it is life. Your last letter was stay and prop to me—nourishment for half a year. Now I need another and you will give it to me; not because you bear me friendship—you cannot have much—but because you are compassionate of soul and you would condemn no one to prolonged suffering to save yourself a few moments' trouble. To forbid me to write to you, to refuse to answer me, would be to tear from me my only joy on earth, to



deprive me of my last privilege. . . . So long as I believe you are pleased with me, so long as I have hope of receiving news from you, I can be at rest and not too sad. But when a prolonged and gloomy silence seems to threaten me with the estrangement of my master—when day by day I await a letter, and when day by day disappointment comes to fling me back into overwhelming sorrow, and the sweet delight of seeing your handwriting and reading your counsel escapes me as a vision that is vain, then fever claims me—I lose appetite and sleep—I pine away. . . .

May I write to you again next May? I would rather wait a year, but it is impossible—it is too long.

As far as we know this letter was the last that Charlotte ever wrote to her beloved master.

## VIII

These, then, are the letters.

The interest that they aroused was intense and, after the shock and revelation of their publication, a fresh assessment of Charlotte's life was clearly necessary. Some of her biographers, disconcerted by the refutation of all that they had so stoutly asserted, stuck obstinately to their original viewpoint and refused to admit that the letters were of great importance. Others, particularly foreign writers, took the letters as revealing more, far more, than they truthfully contain. But many writers, sincerely anxious to arrive at understanding, have made wise and constructive efforts to explain and analyse a relationship which, in its essence, is difficult to explain.

To many the letters are 'love-letters' pure and simple. 'If this', says Phyllis Bentley,<sup>1</sup> 'from a young woman of twenty-eight to a man, be not the language of love, it is difficult to surmise in what that language consists.' 'She had fallen in love with M. Heger', says E. F. Benson,<sup>2</sup> 'and she was writing to him in terms that wring the heart of those who can now read what she said in a

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Bentley, *The Brontës* (Home & Van Thal, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> E. F. Benson, *Charlotte Brontë* (Longmans, 1932).



few of those desolate and longing letters.' 'No one can read these letters', adds K. A. R. Sugden,<sup>1</sup> 'without being convinced that Charlotte was passionately in love with M. Heger.'

Yet Clement Shorter<sup>2</sup> takes quite a different view: 'There is nothing in these letters of hers that any enthusiastic woman might not write to a man double her age [*sic!*] who was a married man with a family, and who had been her teacher.'

Or again, there is Laura Hinkley in her illuminating book *The Brontës: Charlotte and Emily*, who explains, with much insight and truth, that Charlotte 'could feel the loss of a valuable friend more keenly than many people feel anything in the course of their lives', that her power of putting feeling into words was unequalled, and that 'She wrote in total oblivion of the rules governing social communications between people of opposite sex'. Or the very understanding letter of Mr C. W. Hatfield, quoted in Fannie Ratchford's *The Web of Childhood*; Mr Hatfield, though not denying that they are love-letters, says that they are 'not the kind of letters that a woman writes to her lover'.

Here, perhaps, we come nearest to the truth. They are letters of deep and passionate feeling, but they are not letters of passionate love. For certainly they are not love-letters in the usual sexual sense, nor can one imagine for a moment that Charlotte Brontë herself intended them to be read in that sense.

It is necessary to remember how many things have to be taken into account before one can arrive at any sort of estimation of the nature of Charlotte's feeling for M. Heger—obviously the most important emotional experience of her life. Besides her lack of sophistication and ignorance of social conduct, one has to remember her humility (particularly her humility), her intellectual loneliness, and the exaggerated intensity of all her reactions to life. To stigmatize her attachment as a 'guilty passion', and to imagine that the whole truth of the matter lies in that short description, is to be lamentably unimaginative.

We have little help from Charlotte herself in unravelling the

<sup>1</sup> K. A. R. Sugden, *A Short History of the Brontës* (O.U.P., 1929).

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, July 30th, 1913.



truth. If she confided her feeling to Emily there is no record of it, and her letters to Ellen are singularly unrevealing. This alone perhaps proves that it was a most deeply felt and deep-rooted experience.

If, as seems fairly certain now, Charlotte *was* in love with M. Heger, it is extremely unlikely, as Phyllis Bentley has pointed out, that she realized this herself. If he had ever made sexual love to her there is no doubt that she would have been both horrified and shocked. The very fact that he was a married man would, in her puritanical and strict judgment, have removed him from the realms of possibility as a lover. And because she felt this herself, and never allowed herself to think of him in this light, it would not enter her head that other people could so misconstrue her motives as to imagine that she was making love to him. It would certainly never have dawned on her in the wildest realms of her imagination to believe that M. Heger had any passionate feeling for her. She was far, far too humble.

As she was to write years later in *Villette*:

I disclaim, with the utmost scorn, every sneaking suspicion of 'warmer feelings'; women do not entertain these 'warmer feelings' where, from the commencement, through the whole progress of an acquaintance, they have never once been cheated of the conviction that to do so would be to commit a moral absurdity: nobody ever launches into love unless he has seen or dreamed the rising of Hope's star over Love's troubled waters.

But what does seem certain is that Charlotte sincerely believed M. Heger to be her friend. He had, after all, singled her out for attention, appreciated her brain, and had always shown great interest in her. When she had suggested going home he had not wanted to let her go. From this, she had not unnaturally inferred that he liked her, and would continue to take an interest in her progress after she left Brussels. To a woman passionately responsive and emotionally starved as she was, such a friendship, limited though she knew it to be, was precious beyond rubies. She could not bear, or face, the thought of losing it.



For this exaggeration of feeling M. Heger himself was probably (however unwittingly) very largely to blame. It was not altogether his fault—he was upright, honest and well-meaning—but the fault of his temperament. It was partly due to his methods of teaching—to the highly-charged emotional atmosphere he liked to work up between himself and his pupils in order to get them to work their best. When Charlotte first went to Brussels she was lonely, frustrated and convinced of her own unattractiveness; M. Heger, with kindness, understanding, and real appreciation of her talents, singled her out for his attentions. Later, too, there was that emotional parting between them, the parting which, so Charlotte thought, had ‘grieved’ him so much. And perhaps, when she first returned to Haworth, there were letters. Satisfying letters. For M. Heger had a charm and effusiveness of style in his correspondence of which no Brontë student can fail to be aware. There are, for instance, the revealing letters recently published in the Brontë Society magazine *Transactions* for the year 1949: letters from M. Heger to a former pupil. In mitigation for having kept her waiting for news of him he says:

I only have to think of you to see you. I often give myself the pleasure when my duties are over, when the light fades. I postpone lighting the gas lamp in my library, I sit down, smoking my cigar and with a hearty will I evoke your image—and you come (without wishing to, I dare say) but I see you, I talk with you—you, with that little air, affectionate undoubtedly, but independent and resolute, firmly determined not to allow any opinion without being previously convinced, demanding to be convinced before allowing yourself to submit—in fact, just as I knew you, my dear L——, and as I have esteemed and loved you.<sup>1</sup>

Here is M. Heger himself writing in a style which might by some be thought to be the language of love! Meaning nothing, probably. Just a flowery courtesy. But that was his way. That was the kind of man he was. And if Charlotte, lonely, thwarted, longing for affection and reassurance, read more into his atten-

<sup>1</sup> This letter is now in the possession of W. K. Cunliffe, Esq., with whose kind permission it is here reprinted.



tions, his sentimentalities, than he ever intended to be there, can one altogether blame her? And how can one but sympathize with her baffled distraction when, all of a sudden, he changed after her return to England—when he ceased to care anything more about her, when, for no adequate reason that she knew of, all abruptly seemed to be over between them.

How did the correspondence end? According to Charlotte it was because M. Heger intimated to her that his wife objected to it, and he suggested that if she wrote again she had better address her letter to the *Athénée* next door. This, so Charlotte told Laetitia Wheelwright some months later, she would never have dreamed of doing and so she wrote no more. But this does not quite tally with the explanation given by the Heger family. They always asserted that Charlotte's letters betrayed a growing attachment which their parents thought it kind and wise to check, and that she was therefore advised to tone her letters down and 'write merely of her health and occupations and of those of her home circle'. After this, so they said, Charlotte never wrote again.

Whatever the truth, most critics agree that the Heger family showed reticence and dignity in their attitude towards Charlotte. They were aware of all the rumours and legends that were being circulated after Charlotte became famous, and particularly after the publication of *Villette*. They knew that M. Heger's behaviour had always been blameless and honourable. They had Charlotte's letters in their possession to prove their case. But they said nothing and published nothing. It was not until they were certain that all members of the family intimately connected with Charlotte were dead, and therefore there was nobody left likely to be hurt by the disclosure, that they allowed the letters to be published.

It is obvious that the whole situation, in Brussels and after, had been fraught with difficulty, and one cannot withhold sympathy for the Hegers' point of view. The relationship between these three people had led to complications which, in the nature of things, could only end in suffering for one of them. Mme. Heger, realizing Charlotte's growing attachment to her husband, had



done her best tactfully to bring the situation to an end without causing a scene. And M. Heger, who until the letters started arriving had never realized the intensity of Charlotte's feeling for him, then saw that this friendship might cause difficulties with his wife, and so he also did his best to end it. Charlotte was the outsider, the intrusive third, and therefore she was the one who was doomed to suffer.

For poor Charlotte, with her blinding honesty and intensity of feeling, had not conformed to the normal social behaviour of a sophisticated world. She had been influenced only by the dictates and needs of her own heart. It was not until she was told bluntly in so many words that Mme. Heger objected to the correspondence that she realized (to her shocked dismay) the construction which might be put on her letters. Up to that time she had probably persuaded herself that a warm and heartfelt friendship between herself and M. Heger was something quite possible, and beyond reproach. It is strange that she should have been so blind to the more worldly and obvious interpretation of her attitude towards a young man of thirty-four, only seven years older than herself. Yet her innocence was genuine and sincere.

As W. Robertson Nicoll wrote in *The Times* of July 30th, 1913, the day after the publication of the letters:

To recognize the line which divides friendship from some warmer feeling for which the word 'love' is but a vague and confusing description is not within everyone's power, and a mistake in this direction is not necessarily a sin. The story, as we can now read it, is a story which, so far from being discreditable to Charlotte Brontë, commands for her the deepest reverence and sympathy. . . . To discuss the emotions which she has so innocently laid bare one needs a purity of thought and language equal to her own.

Without doubt the realization, when at last it came to Charlotte, that she had been so misunderstood, so vilified, seared her very soul. It was the tragedy of her life, the bitterest, most mortifying of all her life's experiences. It is unlikely that she ever forgot M. Heger; but she never went back to Brussels and she



never saw him again. Among her poems this, perhaps, is one of the most revealing of the depths of suffering she endured through this tragic relationship:

He saw my heart's woe, discovered my soul's anguish,  
How in fever, in thirst, in atrophy, it pined;  
Knew he could heal, yet looked and let it languish—  
To its moans spirit-deaf, to its pangs spirit-blind.

He was mute as is the grave, he stood stirless as a tower,  
At last I looked up and saw I prayed to stone:  
I asked help of that which to help had no power,  
I sought love where love was utterly unknown.

It was the end of something which had been to her as the very bread of life. She had poured out the secret yearnings of her heart to M. Heger, her beloved master, and, unaware of her need, he had failed to understand.



## CHAPTER V

# *Charlotte and Branwell*

You ask me if I do not think men are strange beings. I do indeed—I have often thought so; and I think too that the mode of bringing them up is strange, they are not half sufficiently guarded from temptations. Girls are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed, while boys are turned loose on the world as if they, of all beings in existence, were the wisest and the least liable to be led astray.

CHARLOTTE TO MISS WOOLER

### I

**O**N January 2nd, 1844, Charlotte returned to Haworth. As she never believed in her own power to inspire affection she was very surprised to find that the Belgian pupils at the Pensionnat Heger actually regretted her departure.

It had always been her intention after leaving Brussels to start a school, but as soon as she arrived home she was hedged round by family complications and in consequence she found it difficult at first to make plans.

Anne and Branwell were home from Thorp Green for the Christmas holidays—they were, so she told Ellen, ‘both wondrously valued in their situations’, and that must have been a relief. When they returned to their posts, however, Charlotte found herself and Emily left alone with a father now more than ever dependent, his blindness increasing daily. It would, she felt, be impossible to leave him. Her own drive and energy, too, had sustained shock and undermining through the strain of her recent experiences. The parting, the separation, from all that had been her life for two years, had left her bruised and uncertain. ‘Something in me’, she told Ellen that January, ‘which used to be enthusiasm is toned down and broken.’ And yet she was restless, she longed for release from frustration. ‘I have fewer illusions; what I wish for now is active exertion—a stake in life. Haworth



seems such a lonely, quiet spot, buried away from the world. I no longer regard myself as young—indeed, I shall soon be twenty-eight; and it seems as if I ought to be working and braving the rough realities of the world, as other people do.’ She probably hardly knew herself what it was that she wanted. Her health and spirits were at a low ebb and, after her return from Brussels, there is a curious flatness in her letters to her friends. It is almost as though, as she herself hints, a spring had been broken—deadening her response, her enthusiasms, her affections, even her customary asperity. The letters to Ellen continued to be written at regular intervals but the friendship now was conventional and unemotional. In place of earlier endearments she now signed herself ‘Yours faithfully’, often only with the initials ‘C. B.’, while opening the letters coolly with ‘My dear Ellen’ or ‘Dear Nell’. It is incredible, looking back, to realize that during all these months in which she was writing those anguished letters to M. Heger she was also carrying on this placid correspondence with Ellen in which (after the first letter) M. Heger is never mentioned. Her suffering must have been intense, and made so much more so by the fact that she had no confidante but suffered in loneliness.

Her chief companion at this time was Emily. She and Emily walked together for long hours on the moors, wearing out their shoe-leather. It was a satisfying intimacy in some ways, but it had many reservations. Charlotte would have liked to have drawn closer to Emily but it was Emily who kept her at a distance. Emily was undemonstrative and reserved and frighteningly self-sufficient. Most of the softer side of her nature was kept entirely for animals and birds. She and Charlotte had had the same upbringing, and that was their bond, but in other ways the sisters were very unlike. Emily probably despised Charlotte for her vulnerability, and in return Charlotte marvelled at Emily for her detachment. It did not make for confidences, for an outpouring of the torment that was in Charlotte’s heart; and how much Emily knew of Charlotte’s feeling for M. Heger is uncertain to this day. Probably she was told very little, although she may have guessed a good deal.



Over plans and ideas for their prospective school the sisters were on safer ground. Both at this time fully intended to open a school at the earliest opportunity. But as they could not leave their father they had decided that they would have to start the school at home. They tried to persuade themselves that this was a feasible idea. They still had the money Aunt Branwell had left them and with some of this they proposed to build an extra wing on to the Parsonage. Charlotte now felt herself fully qualified to teach, for had not M. Heger, when she left Brussels, given her a diploma, signed with the seal of the Athénée Royale, of which he was professor, certifying her abilities as a teacher?

Charlotte now, in a feverish spurt of energy, made desperate efforts to get the scheme started and to find pupils. She wrote to everyone she could think of in her limited circle of acquaintance. If only, as she told Ellen, she could make sure of just *one* pupil, then she would get prospectuses printed and send them out. But disappointment and frustration crippled her at every turn. She wrote first to her old employer, Mrs White, and heard a few days later in a friendly letter from Mr White that if only she had got in touch with them a month earlier they would have sent her their own daughter. Now, however, the daughter and a friend, who also might have come to Charlotte, were promised elsewhere. It was annoying, but Charlotte tried to take comfort from the manner of the refusal. At any rate they had shown confidence in her—a confidence which she so often felt to be lacking in herself. A Mrs Busfeild, of Keighley, was another acquaintance of whom she had hopes and, spurred on by Mr White's encouragement, she even called on this lady to press her project. But the answer she received was not altogether heartening. 'She was exceedingly polite,' Charlotte wrote to Ellen, 'regretted that her children were already at school at Liverpool; thought the undertaking a most praiseworthy one, but feared I should have some difficulty in making it succeed on account of the situation.'

There were, it seemed, many difficulties attached to starting a school at the Parsonage. Even though now they had had the



prospectuses printed and were distributing them as best as they could, through Ellen, the Taylors and other friends, there were still no prospective pupils. They had tried to make the school sound attractive in the circular. Copies of it can still be seen at Haworth Museum, a pathetic reminder of their efforts: 'The Misses Brontë's Establishment for the Board and Education of a Limited Number of Young Ladies, The Parsonage, Haworth, near Bradford. The terms for Board and Education are £35 per annum.' Mrs Busfield had remarked that she thought the terms very moderate. But nobody seemed impressed. As far as one can gather they did not have a single application, or even enquiry. The months dragged on, hope waned, and gradually gave way to resignation. 'I send you two more circulars because you ask for them,' Charlotte wrote to Ellen, in September, 'not because I hope their distribution will produce any result.' She was herself now rapidly losing all faith in the project. One can hardly be surprised as, under the then existing circumstances, the whole scheme sounds to us, from a distance of years, strangely fantastic. The house was far too small and would have needed considerable building additions. Mr Brontë, with his failing eyesight, would have been a considerable handicap. There was always the threat of Branwell's peccadilloes in the offing. And who, anyway, would have cared to send their young daughters to school in a dreary, cold, grey vicarage surrounded by gravestones?

By October of that year 1844 the Brontës had to admit defeat. 'Everyone wishes us well,' Charlotte said, 'but there are no pupils to be had.' However, they were not going to break their hearts over this setback. 'The effort must be beneficial whatever the result may be,' Charlotte told Ellen, 'because it teaches us experience and an additional knowledge of the world.' Perhaps there was even a tinge of relief in her acceptance of failure. She urges Ellen not to trouble herself so much in trying to find pupils. 'Depend upon it, if you were to persuade a mamma to bring her child to Haworth, the aspect of the place would frighten her, and she would probably take the dear girl back with her *instantér*.' Charlotte took refuge in flippancy. It seemed that by now she



did not really care very much. She was in low spirits anyway, partly through the strain of her abortive correspondence with M. Heger, partly through worry about her eyesight. Her father was rapidly going blind, and sometimes she felt that she was following in his footsteps. She had hurt her eyes in her extreme youth, by making minute copies of engravings and by writing microscopically in tiny notebooks the romances of Angria. Now she was beginning to feel the effects. Even the solace of literary work was denied to her. 'I should not know this lethargy', she told M. Heger in a letter, 'if I could write. Formerly I passed whole days and weeks and months in writing. . . . But now my sight is too weak to write. Were I to write much I should become blind. This weakness of sight is a terrible hindrance to me.'

Her chief occupation was knitting. She did not read much to herself as she wanted to preserve her eyesight for reading aloud to her father. Mr Brontë, patient but depressed under increasingly threatening cataract, required continual cheering, and Charlotte was the daughter on whom he most relied. She never failed him. All through the difficult and sometimes heart-rending years of her life, her love and attentiveness never faltered. There is hardly a letter to Ellen in which he and his health are not mentioned. She was a model daughter.

For herself it seemed that she now expected little from life. Her letters to Ellen through the months of this uneventful year are chiefly taken up with Ellen's affairs. Occasionally the two girls visited one another. There were budding romances in Ellen's life which never came to anything—Ellen remained a spinster to the end—and which Charlotte liked to tease her about. Mostly these romances were connected with curates. Mr Smith, the Haworth curate, on a visit of Ellen's to the Parsonage, had seemed particularly attentive but Mr Brontë and Charlotte were afraid of this gallantry arousing false hopes in Ellen's breast. 'Mr Smith has not mentioned your name since you left, except once when papa said you were a nice girl, he said "Yes, she is a nice girl—rather quiet. I suppose she has money", and that is all.' 'I think the words speak volumes,' Charlotte added trenchantly, 'they do



not prejudice one in favour of Mr Smith.' She could not help casting her mind back regretfully: 'Mr Weightman was worth two hundred Mr Smiths tied in a bunch', while Mr Brontë, who considered Mr Smith a fickle man likely soon to get tired of a wife, was only too anxious to find another curate at the earliest opportunity so that Mr Smith could go.

Mr Smith did go. There were no further complications with Ellen. 'He has never asked after you since you left, nor even mentioned you in my hearing except to say once when I purposely alluded to you, that you were "not very locomotive".' Charlotte was indignant on her friend's behalf. 'The meaning of the observation I leave you to divine.' Everyone was relieved when Mr Smith took himself off to Ireland. 'Nobody regrets him, because nobody could attach themselves to one who could attach himself to nobody.' Charlotte's opinion of curates, always a low one, had not mellowed with the years. Arthur Bell Nicholls, who took Mr Smith's place eventually, and who afterwards was to play such an important part in Charlotte's life, was regarded at first with the same unflattering eye. 'I cannot for my life see those interesting germs of goodness in him you discovered; his narrowness of mind always strikes me chiefly. I fear he is indebted to your imagination for his hidden treasure.'

## II

The year 1845 started flatly with no very definite omen of disaster to come. Branwell came home from Thorp Green with Anne for the Christmas holidays but he seemed, to Charlotte's intense relief, to be in a fairly reasonable mood. During the previous summer the sisters had had their apprehensions aroused by his strange inconsistencies of behaviour: elation one moment, moodiness and irritability the next. He had seemed peculiarly restless and had thrown out disturbing hints of 'treachery' which they had failed to understand. Something was wrong: they were convinced of that. But always these last years that fear had been the bogey of their existence: the wondering just what Branwell



would do next to involve them in trouble. They preferred now to push such thoughts to the back of their minds and to accept any small mercies with relief. 'Branwell and Anne leave us on Saturday', Charlotte wrote to Ellen. 'Branwell has been quieter and less irritable on the whole than he was in summer. Anne is as usual—always good, mild and patient. I think she too is a little stronger than she was.'

Ellen herself was concerned with worry over the illness of her brother George, and Charlotte wrote at intervals counselling her with affection, sympathy and advice. 'Through all changes, and through all chances, I trust I shall love you as I do now.' Charlotte always remained steadfast to old friends, and now she was faced with a loss as Mary Taylor, impatient with the restrictions of life for an independent woman in England, had decided to emigrate to New Zealand. When Charlotte had first heard of this plan the previous September she had been shocked: 'To me it is something as if a great planet fell out of the sky.' But it seemed that Mary Taylor's mind was made up. In February Charlotte went to Hunsworth, Mary's home, on a farewell visit: a visit which she did not enjoy, as, finding all the other inmates of the household to be in high spirits and full of gaiety, she could not help contrasting her own state of mind. She had continual headaches and her flatness of spirit was unendurable: 'I never was fortunate enough to be able to rally, for so much as a single hour, while I was there', she told Ellen. 'I am sure all, with the exception perhaps of Mary, were very glad when I took my departure. I begin to perceive that I have too little life in me, nowadays, to be fit company for any except very quiet people. Is it age, or what else, that changes one so?'

Is it age—or what else? A useless question to have asked Ellen, who had always been denied the clue to Charlotte's *malaise*. Mary, perhaps more discerning and, with her ruthless probing mind, more able to read between the lines, saw that there was something very wrong with Charlotte, and Charlotte's life, and did her best to rouse her old school-friend to a realization of her predicament: 'I told her very warmly that she ought not to stay at home; that



to spend the next five years at home, in solitude, and weak health, would ruin her; that she would never recover it. Such a dark shadow came over her face when I said, "Think of what you'll be five years hence!" that I stopped, and said "Don't cry, Charlotte!" She did not cry, but went on walking up and down the room, and said in a little while, "But I intend to stay, Polly".

Charlotte had quite made up her mind. Her father needed her and she would stay—the only happiness in her life, the only hope, the recurring anguished expectancy of the post hour. By now M. Heger was no longer answering her letters, her own appeals to him had been growing lately more abject, more desperate. What was there to look forward to? Her letters to Ellen reflect her depression:

I can hardly tell you how time gets on at Haworth. There is no event whatever to mark its progress. One day resembles another; and all have heavy, lifeless physiognomies. Sunday, baking day, and Saturday are the only ones that have any distinctive mark. Meantime life wears away. I shall soon be thirty, and I have done nothing yet. . . . There was a time when Haworth was a very pleasant place to me; it is not so now. I feel as if we were all buried here. I long to travel, to work, to live a life of action.

And then, relenting perhaps at having inflicted Ellen so often with her discontents:

Excuse me, dear, for troubling you with my fruitless wishes. I will put by the rest and not trouble you with them.

It was a temptation when Ellen, who was going to prepare a home at Hathersage for her brother Henry, recently married, invited Charlotte to join her. At first Charlotte refused the invitation. She felt that she could not leave her father for a single day. His sight was diminishing rapidly and his spirits sinking. 'He dreads the state of dependence to which blindness will inevitably reduce him.' Her reluctance to leave home was real and understandable but Ellen felt hurt and accused Charlotte of a coldness in refusal. Charlotte swiftly refuted this: 'It was a queer sort of coldness when I would have given my ears to say Yes and was obliged



to say No.' Now, however, she had better prospects, for circumstances had changed. Anne had come home and she had decided not to return to Thorp Green. 'Her presence at home certainly makes me feel more at liberty. Then, dear Ellen, if all be well, I will come and see you at Hathersage. Tell me only when I must come. Mention the week and the day.'

Charlotte was looking forward now intensely to this visit, to a change of scene, and to being with Ellen whose quiet, affectionate constancy was always a comfort to her. Perhaps, too, she felt it might be her last chance for some time to snatch at a recuperative happiness. 'I do long to be with you,' she wrote, 'and I feel nervously afraid of being prevented, or put off in some way.' In the next sentence she alludes to Branwell: Branwell, the restless, the incalculable. He had been home for a week's holiday but had then left with the Robinson family for Scarborough. Soon he would be home again. Her old fears, apprehensions, were assailing her. Something was going on behind the scenes in the Robinson family over which she dared not speculate and which Anne, driven from her situation by a sickened distaste, had so far barely hinted at. But in the meantime they had to enjoy themselves while they could. Anne and Emily went off for two days together to York where they played at Gondals all the time and, on their return, Charlotte went to Hathersage on the long-promised visit.

It was a pleasant visit of three weeks and she enjoyed it. Ellen's brother, Henry, Charlotte's one-time suitor, was married at last and on his honeymoon, and Ellen and Charlotte busied themselves in preparing for his homecoming. Charlotte had stipulated beforehand that she did not wish to be dragged out visiting. The bait of meeting with yet another curate was no temptation. 'I have no desire to see your medical-clerical curate. I think he must be like most other curates I have seen; and they *seem* to me a self-seeking, vain, empty race.' It must have seemed to Charlotte sometimes that there was no escape from curates. Only a few days before she left home three of them had descended in full force on the Parsonage just at tea-time—on a Monday, too, which was baking day, and when she was hot and tired. An argument unfortunately



had started at tea-time on the demerits of Dissenters and Charlotte's temper had 'lost its balance'. She had pronounced a few sentences, sharply and rapidly, which had struck them all dumb. Even Mr Brontë had been horrified.

But the holiday at Hathersage did Charlotte good, probably soothing her exhausted nerves, and taking her mind momentarily from her own troubles. On the way home in the train she found herself in the same carriage with a man whom she recognized as being French. She had not heard the French language spoken since she had left Brussels, and now the longing to establish again some connection between herself and the kinsmen of M. Heger made her forget her shyness, forget her horror of strangers. She spoke to the man: '*Monsieur est Français, n'est-ce pas?*' 'He gave a start of surprise,' she told Ellen, 'and answered immediately in his own tongue.' It was, as Charlotte wrote later to M. Heger: 'Like music in my ears—every word was most precious to me because it reminded me of you—I love French for your sake with all my heart and soul.'

But the stimulation of this fleeting encounter with a stranger in the railroad carriage was soon wiped out by the news which greeted her when she reached home. It was late when she arrived—ten o'clock—and she was met immediately by Anne with the unhappy tidings that Branwell was at home and that he had been dismissed from Thorp Green by Mr Robinson in deep disgrace.

### III

Branwell was in a terrible state. Garrulous, maudlin, self-pitying, remorseful—the whole story came out in floods of passionate excitement. He was in love with Mrs Robinson, Mrs Robinson had returned his love; for months this had been going on, unbeknown to her husband, but now Mr Robinson had found out. Branwell was forbidden ever to see Mrs Robinson again, he was never to see any of the family again; Mr Robinson had written to him describing his behaviour as bad beyond expression and 'charging him on pain of exposure to break off instantly and



for ever all communication with every member of the family'. It meant ruin, the downfall of all his hopes, a crushing blow which he was quite unable to bear. He loved Mrs Robinson, he could not live without her. He ranted on and on, prodigal with all the details of his guilty passion, concealing nothing, trying to drown his agony in talk, in drink, in stunning himself into stupor.

His sisters were appalled. It was what they had somehow been dreading for the last few months but perhaps they had not realized it could be quite so bad as this. But now everything was explained: his strange moods, his restlessness, the alternating fits of gloom and excitement. If they could believe Branwell the situation was about as bad as it could be. They were back where they started from, but with disgrace piled upon disgrace. Branwell's career was again in ruins.

He was in such a state of unbalanced excitability that it was thought wise to send him away for a week with somebody to look after him. His friend John Brown, the sexton, took him for a holiday to North Wales. From there he wrote a letter to Charlotte expressing contrition and making promises of better things in the future. Charlotte did not believe him. Over and over again she had tried to hope, tried to bolster him up, to re-establish him, to have faith in a future which once had seemed so brilliant. But now hope was dead. From this time onwards her comments about Branwell are terse, resigned, accepting of disillusion. Her faith was exhausted.

What was the truth of Branwell's relationship with Mrs Robinson? Only one thing perhaps is certain and that is that we cannot accept Branwell's own statements at their face value. Nowadays Branwell would be an obvious and fitting subject for treatment by a psychiatrist; but in a less enlightened age all his failings were accepted only with anger and helpless bewilderment. Nobody knew how to deal with him. Some of his lies were swallowed wholesale—others were angrily repudiated. His drunkenness was a cause for shame, something to be concealed if possible, certainly to be hushed up. His downfall after the Robinson affair was swift and disastrous. Unable to forget his grief and



anguish of frustration, he gave way completely to drink and made family life a martyrdom.

Bitterly disillusioned by Branwell himself, his sisters also apportioned a fair share of the blame for the debacle to Mrs Robinson. If he was guilty of an unlawful intrigue then it stood to reason she must be guilty too. Charlotte must have spoken very forcibly on this theme to Mrs Gaskell to account for Mrs Gaskell's violent outburst in her biography in which, in colourful and excited language, she pillories Mrs Robinson as one of the Jezebels of the earth. This vehemence not surprisingly soon landed her in trouble, and there had to be reservations in the second edition and a public letter of retraction in *The Times*. Since then opinions have differed as to Mrs Robinson's share of the guilt. Many details of Branwell's own story have been proved to be false and, when Mrs Robinson demanded legal investigations after the publication of Mrs Gaskell's biography, there was no evidence to support his claims. His letters to his friend Francis Grundy at this time were written in such heightened and exaggerated language that it is difficult to judge them. He told Mr Grundy that his relationship with Mrs Robinson led to reciprocations which he 'had little looked for' and that, during nearly three years, he had daily 'troubled pleasure soon chastised by fear'.

'Three months since' (so he wrote) 'I received a furious letter from my employer, threatening to shoot me if I returned from my vacation, which I was passing at home. . . . I have lain during nine long weeks utterly shattered in body and broken down in mind. The probability of her becoming free to give me herself and estate never rose to drive away the prospect of her decline under her present grief. . . . Eleven continuous nights of sleepless horror have reduced me to almost blindness.'

He seemed convinced of Mrs Robinson's devotion to himself—afterwards rather drastically disproved when her husband died. It is unlikely that she took Branwell seriously though extremely likely that, at the beginning at any rate, she enjoyed his attentions. It was a pleasantly flattering situation from her point of view. She was seventeen years older than the young tutor, and the young



tutor was charming, gay, witty and attractive. How far she encouraged him or bestowed her favours we cannot be sure, but there is Anne's testimony to prove that something irregular was going on. 'During my stay [at Thorp Green]', Anne said, 'I have had some very unpleasant and undreamt-of experience of human nature.' Mrs Gaskell said that it was obvious the Robinson children knew something of what was happening as they sometimes threatened their mother 'to tell their father of how she went on with Mr Brontë'. At the very least, it must have been a flirtation. Later probably Branwell became too intense, too excitable, too persistent, claimed more than Mrs Robinson in the wildest flights of imagination had any intention of giving, and so, irked, and perhaps rather frightened, she told her husband of Branwell's attentions and got him dismissed.

Whatever the truth of it, it was all a sorry story, and Branwell's downfall had repercussions on the lives of all his family. Mr Brontë grieved incessantly. However great had been his own shortcomings in the upbringing of his son, there was nothing spurious in his paternal feelings. Of the sisters it was Charlotte who suffered the most through Branwell's tragedy. Not only had she lost her brother but her confidante as well, her affinity in the family. Emily and Anne had always sided together, her opposite number had been Branwell. And now, what was there left? She felt the loss bitterly, but hid her grief, as she so often did in life, under a cloak of reserve and asperity. She did not even have the outlet which her sisters periodically allowed themselves of writing down their thoughts and feelings to be read at some future date. These 'secret papers' of Emily and Anne (found years after Charlotte's death in a little pin-box by Mr Nicholls) are illuminating in their revelation of the two other girls' reactions to Branwell's disgrace. The papers were written on July 30th, 1845, and were intended to be put away for three years and opened in 1848. Anne's paper reveals her sadness:

Yesterday was Emily's birthday, and the time when we should have opened our 1841 paper, but by mistake we opened it to-day



instead. How many things have happened since it was written—some pleasant, some far otherwise. Yet I was then at Thorp Green, and now I am only just escaped from it. I was wishing to leave it then, and if I had known that I had four years longer to stay how wretched I should have been; but during my stay I have had some very unpleasant and undreamt-of experience of human nature. . . .

Branwell has left Luddenden Foot, and been a tutor at Thorp Green, and had much tribulation and ill-health. He was very ill on Thursday, but he went with John Brown to Liverpool, where he now is, I suppose; and we hope he will be better and do better in future. . . .

Charlotte has lately been to Hathersage, in Derbyshire, on a visit of three weeks to Ellen Nussey. She is now sitting sewing in the dining-room. Emily is ironing upstairs. I am sitting in the dining-room in the rocking-chair before the fire with my feet on the fender. Papa is in the parlour. Tabby and Martha are, I think, in the kitchen. Keeper and Flossy are, I do not know where. Little Dick is hopping in his cage. When the last paper was written we were thinking of setting up a school. The scheme has been dropt, and long after taken up again, and dropt again, because we could not get pupils. Charlotte is thinking about getting another situation. She wishes to go to Paris. Will she go? . . . Emily is engaged in writing the Emperor Julius's life. . . . She is writing some poetry too. I wonder what it is about? I have begun the third volume of *Passages in the Life of an Individual*. I wish I had finished it. . . .

I wonder how we shall all be, and where and how situated on the thirtieth of July, 1848, when, if we are all alive, Emily will be just 30. I shall be in my 29th year, Charlotte in her 33rd, and Branwell in his 32nd; and what changes shall we have seen and known; and shall we be much changed ourselves? I hope not, for the worse at least. I for my part, cannot well be *flatter* or older in mind than I am now. Hoping for the best, I conclude,

Anne Brontë

Emily's paper is more buoyant, more optimistic. She dismisses the school plan with a brisk slanginess which is strangely uncharacteristic. 'We did our little all; but it was found no go.' Can this be the Emily of the poems—of the haunting passion and poetry of *Wuthering Heights*? She goes on to review the family circumstances as they appeared to her:



## PASSIONATE SEARCH

Now I don't desire a school at all, and none of us have any great longing for it. We have cash enough for our present wants, with a prospect of accumulation. We are all in decent health, only that papa has a complaint in his eyes, and with the exception of B., who I hope, will be better and do better hereafter. I am quite contented for myself: not as idle as formerly, altogether as hearty, and having learnt to make the most of the present and long for the future with the fidgetiness that I cannot do all I wish; seldom or ever troubled with nothing to do, and merely desiring that everybody could be as comfortable as myself and as undesponding, and then we should have a very tolerable world of it. . . .

Tabby, who was gone in our last paper, is come back, and has lived with us two years and a half, and is in good health. Martha, who also departed, is here too. . . . I must hurry off now to my turning and ironing. I have plenty of work on hands, and writing, and am altogether full of business. With best wishes for the whole house till 1848, July 30th, and as much longer as may be,

I conclude,

Emily Brontë

There is happiness in this fragment, and a power of detachment which is amazing. It would seem that by now Emily had completely worked out her own philosophy, and the citadel of her inner peace was secure against any shock or stress that life could bring to her.

## IV

Some writers compare Branwell's hectic passion for Mrs Robinson to Charlotte's feeling for M. Heger and consider that, for this reason alone, Charlotte might have had a fellow-feeling for her errant brother and shown him greater understanding and sympathy.

But, quite apart from the fact that there was really little resemblance between their plights, was Charlotte really heartless towards Branwell? E. F. Benson in his biography of Charlotte writes of her 'unmitigated hatred and contempt' for him, but there is no real evidence that Charlotte was any less kind than her



sisters. In support of his criticism E. F. Benson quotes Charlotte's letters to Ellen in which, from now on, there are occasional complaints of Branwell's behaviour: 'stark bulletins', Mr Benson calls them, showing 'no pity, no sympathy'. But was not this merely Charlotte's way? She was so often terse in her comment on human frailty, but her bark was generally worse than her bite, and although she spoke and wrote unkind words she seldom, if ever, did an unkind action. She had, as Ernest Dimnet wrote, 'a nature in which tenderness dominated and which only needed sunshine'. At Haworth, in the village, and in her own home, she was well known all her life for her kindness of heart and her thoughtfulness.

So perhaps one can feel a little compassionate understanding if, in this year of strain and unhappiness, she occasionally gave way to bitterness and complaint. Ellen, after all, was the friend of her youth, and Ellen herself had been through a similar experience in her own family life, and was interested in Branwell's progress. Miss Wooller, too, would sometimes enquire for him and, apart from answering the questions of these two old friends, there is no evidence that Charlotte complained about him to anybody else. At the same time, she suffered intensely. Branwell's habits of drunkenness and instability now seemed deep-rooted and quite hopeless of cure. Every morning early he set off for the 'Black Bull' and sat at the bar, drinking gin, until all his money was spent. On these occasions he would ramble on, to anybody who would listen, of his love, his longing, for Mrs Robinson, of her desirability, her sweetness and her beauty. If there were no human beings within earshot he would talk about her to the dogs. All his self-control had gone. So long as he had money he would drink, and with a drunkard's habits, he was becoming an unpleasant person to be with in the home. 'It is only absolute want of means that acts as any check on him', Charlotte told Ellen. 'One ought indeed to hope to the very last; and I try to do so, but occasionally hope, in his case, seems a fallacy.'

She could not ask Ellen to come to Haworth for a visit because, understandably, she did not wish her friend to share the dis-



comfort of Branwell's behaviour. She was suffering from sleeplessness and worrying all the time about both her father's shortsightedness and her own. But, worst of all, for months there had been no letter from M. Heger. Her last letter to him was written in November 1845—that pitiful outcry of despair because she felt that he was deserting her. 'When day by day I await a letter and when day by day disappointment comes to fling me back into overwhelming sorrow, and the sweet delight of seeing your handwriting and reading your counsel escapes me as a vision that is vain, then fever claims me—I lose appetite and sleep—I pine away.' The conviction that all support, all compassion, all counsel, had been withdrawn, had left her with a bleakness and anguish of spirit which it is difficult for people of more reasoned, equable feeling to understand. It was, for Charlotte, a heart-breaking experience. Though one cannot fairly say that Charlotte was warped or embittered by life, it is certainly true to say that she was *hurt* almost beyond endurance.

It was not long before she had finally to accept the irrevocable fact that her friendship with M. Heger was over. He wrote to her once more, telling her of his wife's displeasure, making it clear to her that the correspondence was distasteful, and she took the hint and never wrote again. If the pitiful letters that she had sent to M. Heger had not been retrieved from the waste-paper basket the whole bitter episode of this abortive correspondence might have passed into oblivion. Did Charlotte pray that this might happen? It is probable, particularly as M. Heger's letters to her—at one time the mainspring of her life—have disappeared without trace. Even Mrs Gaskell never saw them, although M. Heger—when they met in Brussels—hoped that she might have done so. He felt sure, he told her, that Charlotte would have kept them. They had been letters of advice about her studies, conduct, mode of life. Where were they? Did Charlotte herself destroy them? Did Mr Nicholls destroy them after Charlotte's death? Or are they still in existence somewhere: hidden, buried in some secret place?

We have no way of knowing. It is a secret of Charlotte's which



will probably never be solved. But there is a faint possibility that some clue might be gleaned from the pages of *Villette*. Lucy Snowe, too, had precious letters reminding her of a relationship which had ended in frustration and sadness. 'I then made a little roll of my letters, wrapped them in oiled silk, bound them with twine, put them in the bottle. . . . Methuselah, the pear tree, stood at the further end of this walk, near my seat . . . there was a hole, or rather a deep hollow, near his root. I knew there was such a hollow, hidden partly by ivy and creepers growing thick round; and there I meditated hiding my treasure. But I was not only going to hide a treasure—I meant also *to bury a grief*. That grief over which I had lately been weeping, as I wrapped it in its winding sheet, must be interred. Well, I cleared away the ivy, and found the hole; it was large enough to receive the jar, and I thrust it deep in. . . . I fetched a slate and some mortar, put the slate on the hollow, secured it with cement, covered the whole with black mould, and, finally, replaced the ivy. This done, I rested, leaning against the tree; lingering, like any other mourner, beside a newly-sodded grave.'

'*To bury a grief.*' The italics are mine.

## V

There had been one gleam of sunshine to cheer Charlotte through these months of strain and loss. In the autumn of 1845 she had found Emily's poems. For months, years, Emily had been writing poems in secret and she had copied the best of them into two notebooks which she kept in her desk. Quite by chance when Charlotte was alone in the sitting-room, and the desk for some reason had been left open, Charlotte picked up one of these little books and glanced through it. She probably knew she was doing wrong. Emily was essentially secretive, she hated any prying into her affairs, any uncalled-for curiosity. If Charlotte's find had been less miraculous it would probably have been only a matter of minutes before the notebook was back in its place, the desk shut up, all traces of prying fingers obliterated. But,



instead, Charlotte stood transfixed. She wrote about the moment afterwards in the Memoir dedicated to her sisters: 'More than surprise seized me—a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, nor at all like the poetry women generally write. I thought them condensed and terse, vigorous and genuine.' To Mr Williams, she said, months later: 'They stirred my heart like a trumpet.'

It was obvious that such a find could not be overlooked. Whatever happened, Emily must be made to realize that poetry of such a high order could not be left to languish in secret. At the risk of incurring Emily's wrath she told of her discovery, insisted that the poems merited publication. Emily, perhaps understandably, was indignant at the invasion of her privacy and extremely angry with Charlotte. Nevertheless, with the support of Anne who also produced poems of her own, and after an interval of time and much argument, Emily was at last persuaded. The sisters became excited. Literary ambitions, dormant so long, stirred once more within their breasts and they began to make all sorts of plans for publishing a book of the combined poems of all three of them. They would, they decided, each contribute twenty-one poems: they would write under masculine *noms de plume*; strangely, they all had poems ready; even Charlotte, who had complained to M. Heger of being unable to do any literary work, must have been writing in secret.

The poems were sent to several publishers with no success. At last Chambers of Edinburgh were asked for advice as to the best method of achieving publication. Chambers evidently thought that payment for publication would be necessary and recommended a firm in London, Aylott and Jones of Paternoster Row. In January 1846, Aylott and Jones agreed to publish the poems on payment of thirty guineas. Charlotte carried on a spirited and business-like correspondence with them, arranging all the details, and the money was sent. The three sisters decided on their pseudonyms; they would, they decided, keep their own initials but give themselves names which might reasonably be taken as masculine: they would call themselves Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.



Having made all the necessary arrangements there might have seemed nothing much left to do but to possess their souls in patience and await the publication date. But this widening of their horizons, this possibility of achievement, had set a match to wider ambitions. Barriers erected through separation were now broken down between the three sisters: Charlotte found that Emily and Anne were both writing novels. She, too, had lately been making efforts in this direction, tentatively starting *The Professor*; why should they not carry out the ambitions of their childhood and become novelists? It was an intoxicating possibility which inspired them all and filled their minds with a new purpose. All the old happy literary intimacy of bygone days blossomed forth anew and, when their father had gone to bed at night, they reverted to their old habits of writing at the sitting-room table by lamplight, or pacing the room, arms intertwined, discussing and re-discussing for hours on end what they were going to write, or what they had written.

It was all a very profound secret. No other soul, outside themselves, was taken into their confidence. Poor Branwell was excluded as being in no fit condition to share such literary aspiration. Their father may have guessed but was told nothing. Ellen suspected that they wrote for magazines but did not like to mention it. And the stationer in the village could not help wondering what the Miss Brontës did with all the quantities of paper they bought from him. They were always coming to his shop. He found them gentle and kind and very quiet. None of them ever talked much but Charlotte talked the most; she would enquire sometimes tenderly and feelingly for his welfare, and her manner was so humble that she 'never made him feel inferior'.

Meanwhile, on the surface, life at the Parsonage was going on very much as usual. Charlotte wrote the usual letters to her friends, never telling them anything of this secret store of mental nourishment. Instead she told Ellen early in January: 'I have no news whatever to communicate. No changes take place here', and later in the month she wrote a long letter to her old friend, Miss Wooler, in which she touched on many subjects but did



not mention literary ambitions. She was worrying at that time about the railway panic; shares were rapidly losing their value and the three girls had invested most of Aunt Branwell's small capital in railways. Charlotte would have liked to re-invest the money, but could not get her sisters—particularly Emily—to agree. However, she did not allow this to become a matter for brooding: it was always her wont to give way to the more difficult Emily in small matters. 'Perfection', she wrote, 'is not the lot of humanity. And as long as we can regard those we love, and to whom we are closely allied, with profound and very unshaken esteem, it is a small thing that they should vex us occasionally by, what appears to us, unreasonable and headstrong notions. You, my dear Miss Wooler, know full well as I do the value of sisters' affections to each other; there is nothing like it in this world, I believe, when they are nearly equal in age, and similar in education, tastes, and sentiments.'

This letter is enlightening in other ways.

You ask about Branwell. He never thinks of seeking employment and I begin to fear he has rendered himself incapable of filling any respectable station in life; besides, if money were at his disposal, he would use it only to his own injury; the faculty of self-government is, I fear, almost destroyed in him. You ask me if I do not think men are strange beings. I do indeed—I have often thought so; and I think too that the mode of bringing them up is strange, they are not half sufficiently guarded from temptations. Girls are protected as if they were something very frail and silly indeed, while boys are turned loose on the world as if they, of all beings in existence, were the wisest and the least liable to be led astray.

I am glad you like Bromsgrove. . . . I always feel a peculiar satisfaction when I hear of your enjoying yourself. . . . Besides, I have another and very egotistical motive for being pleased: it seems that even 'a lone woman' can be happy, as well as cherished wives and proud mothers. I am glad of that—I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be-married women nowadays, and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman who makes her own way through life quietly, perseveringly, without



support of husband or mother, and who, having attained the age of forty-five or upwards, retains in her possession a well-regulated mind, a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures, fortitude to support inevitable pains, sympathy with the suffering of others, and willingness to relieve want as far as her means extend.

In March Charlotte enjoyed a visit to Ellen, but came home to more anxiety over Branwell—in Charlotte's absence he had squeezed money out of his father, with the usual fatal results. This worry was followed by servant troubles. Poor old Tabby had a sort of fit from which, however, she made a fairly good recovery, and Martha suffered from knee-swelling which meant she had to go home for a time. The weather was cold and wintry, and Charlotte, whose health and spirits were always affected by climate and environment, longed for milder south and west winds.

In May the poems were published, a slim book of one hundred and sixty-five pages, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell*. The sisters' spirits rose and they decided to spend another ten pounds on advertisements. There were one or two passably good reviews. It was at once realized that Emily's poems were in a different class to her sisters' and they were praised, particularly by the *Athenaeum*. Her strength, originality and sense of security were remarkable in these very remarkable poems. But all the same, in spite of mild praise from the critics, Emily's poems were overlooked when they were first published and, perhaps partly because her contributions were rather lost sight of among the far more ordinary verses of Charlotte and Anne, the book was a failure and only two copies were sold. It was a disappointment, but the Brontës accepted it stoically, as was their custom when they met with setbacks. During Emily's lifetime Charlotte was the only person to be convinced of Emily's genius and afterwards she wrote of this first literary venture: 'All of it that merits to be known are the poems of Ellis Bell.' Almost at once after publication the book sank without trace, and several months later Charlotte sent off some of the unsold and unwanted copies to her favourite writers—Wordsworth, Tennyson, Lockhart and



De Quincey among others—with a letter of explanation in which she wrote of 'the rash act of printing a volume of poems'.

However, the sisters remained undaunted and, their novels now being finished, they were determined that their next effort should be to try and establish themselves as novelists. The novels were offered to Aylott and Jones who, however, declined them as it was not their habit to print fiction. The girls then started on a round of the publishers, still keeping their efforts a profound secret and telling nobody.

## VI

It must have been difficult for them at this time to concentrate on literary affairs, as once more they had been plunged into trouble and difficulty over Branwell. He had been slightly better, writing to his friend, Francis Grundy: 'I can now speak cheerfully and enjoy the company of another without the stimulus of six glasses of whisky.' But in June, his old employer, Mr Robinson, died, and once more Branwell was plunged into a state of 'hubbub and confusion'. As usual in Branwell's affairs, the exact truth of what happened is difficult to arrive at. Mrs Gaskell, writing of Mrs Robinson in her biography, stated: 'Her husband had made a will, in which what property he left to her was bequeathed solely on the condition that she should never see Branwell Brontë again.' Mrs Gaskell went on to describe how a servant with this news was despatched for Haworth, in hot haste by Mrs Robinson on her husband's death, how Branwell was sent for to meet this messenger at the 'Black Bull', how after the interview he was heard to be making a distressed noise like 'the bleating of a calf', and was found unconscious in a fit. That Charlotte herself believed most of this story is shown by a letter she wrote to Ellen. Nevertheless part of it, at any rate, was proved afterwards to be false when Mr Robinson's will was produced, with no mention of Branwell in it, and only the ordinary and quite usual financial precautions over his widow's re-marriage.

Whatever the truth of the situation, however, the effects upon



Branwell himself were disastrous. His mind became completely derailed and, unable to accept the bare fact that the widowed Mrs Robinson had no further use for his attentions, he fabricated one story after another in efforts to delude himself. His letters to his friends became increasingly desperate. He wrote to Leyland:

I should have sent you 'Marley Hall' ere now, but I am unable to finish it at present, from agony to which the grave would be far preferable. Mr Robinson is *dead*, and he has left his widow in a dreadful state of health. Through the will she is left quite powerless. The executing trustees detest me, and one declares that, if he sees me, he will shoot me. . . .

For four nights I have not slept. For three days I have not tasted food—and when I think of the state of her I love best on earth, I could wish that my head was as cold and stupid as the medallion which lies in your studio. . . .

What shall I *do*? I know not—I am too hard to die, and too wretched to live.

The terrible instability from which Branwell had suffered all his life left him defenceless under this new blow. Unlike his sisters he had no fortitude, no stoicism. His misguided upbringing—and he himself admitted that all his life he had been 'too much petted'—had ill prepared him for standing up to disaster. His sisters do not seem to have grasped the seriousness of his psychological state. They treated him as a futile and fallen being, futile and fallen through his own will. It is doubtful whether at this juncture anybody could have saved him, but with no professional attention, and little understanding in his home circle, his condition deteriorated rapidly and he quickly went from bad to worse. The Robinson affair became an obsession with him and he could not get it out of his mind. Most of his energies were now expended on complicated ruses to try to get hold of money so that he could buy whisky. He had attacks of delirium tremens and fits of ill-temper followed by stupor. Besides drink he now regularly began to take opium and, while all the family were at church, he would steal out of the house to try to persuade the druggist to let him have further supplies. Occasionally he would ask his friends to find him a job,



but there was no real resolution behind his efforts, and he had a horror of sustained work. Even his creative urge was drying up, and this in itself goaded him to despair. All his life he had meant to be a writer or an artist—he had painted pictures, written poems and stories: and now, with nothing of recent years to show for all his efforts, but an unfinished novel and a great many extremely gloomy verses, he knew that artistically he was finished. 'I wish', he tells Leyland, 'I could flee to writing as a refuge, but I cannot; and, as to *slumber*, my mind, whether awake or asleep, has been in incessant action for seven weeks.'

With all this trouble over Branwell in the home, Charlotte was in no mood for pleasantries from Ellen, who wrote and asked her for the truth of rumours that she was about to be married to Mr Nicholls, her father's curate. 'I scarcely need say', wrote Charlotte crushingly in reply, 'that never was rumour more unfounded. A cold far-away sort of civility are the only terms on which I have ever been with Mr Nicholls. I could by no means think of mentioning such a rumour to him even as a joke. It would make me the laughing-stock of himself and his fellow curates for half a year to come. They regard me as an old maid and I regard them, one and all, as highly uninteresting, narrow and unattractive specimens of the coarser sex.'

Charlotte now had quite made up her mind where her duty lay and what her own future life was to be, and she advised Ellen on similar lines: 'The right path is that which necessitates the greatest sacrifice of self-interest. . . . Your mother is both old and infirm; old and infirm people have few sources of happiness, fewer almost than the comparatively young and healthy can conceive; to deprive them of one of these is cruel. If your mother is more composed when you are with her, stay with her. If she would be unhappy in case you left her, stay with her. . . . I recommend you to do what I am trying to do myself.'

She struggled on valiantly, racked now by toothache which bothered her day and night. Sometimes she longed to shed all her burdens, to cease to be driven by the nagging urge of duty, to get away from it all. 'I wish I had £50 to spare at present, and that



you, Emily, Anne and I, were all at liberty to leave home without our absence being detrimental to anybody. How pleasant to set off *en masse* to the sea-side, and stay there for a few weeks taking in a stock of health and strength.—We could all do with recreation.’

Far from having any ‘recreation’ however, she was soon urged to fresh efforts by the realization that her father’s cataract was now so far advanced that it was time that something was done about it. Mr Brontë was now so blind that he had to be led into the pulpit to preach. Everyone agreed that he preached well under these trying conditions; he could no longer see to read any notes, but his sermons had lost none of their wisdom and vigour, and invariably lasted the customary half-hour. But, in spite of these conscientious efforts to fulfil his parish duties, Mr Brontë was becoming increasingly helpless and depressed, and, as Charlotte had heard good accounts of surgical operation for cataract, she decided to seek the help of a surgeon. She and Emily made an expedition to Manchester, interviewed a Mr Wilson, and arranged for a consultation. Mr Wilson, as soon as he saw Mr Brontë, announced that the eyes were quite ready for operation. Lodgings were found and Charlotte arranged to stay in Manchester for three weeks to look after her father. When the operation was safely over, a nurse was to come and help her. The lodgings were comfortable, but the landlady was away, ill, and Charlotte was worried because she had to arrange board and do the shopping. ‘I find myself excessively ignorant. I can’t tell what to order in the way of meat.’ She sought Ellen’s help, hoping for some hints. ‘What would I not give to have you here! One is forced, step by step, to get experience in the world.’

Fortunately the operation was a great success. The surgeons were surprised by Mr Brontë’s fortitude and, at her father’s request, Charlotte stayed in the room all the time. The operation lasted fifteen minutes and was more extensive than Charlotte had anticipated. Afterwards Mr Brontë had to remain in a dark room, and to be kept as quiet and still as possible for four days. There were no complications and no inflammation ensued.



The successful ending to her anxiety was a great relief to Charlotte. She had found it difficult to keep up her spirits at first as she sat silently with her father in the darkened room, and to make matters worse, her toothache was particularly troublesome. On the very day of the operation, too, she had received an unwelcome brown paper parcel—the manuscript of her novel *The Professor*, returned from yet another of its fruitless journeys to publishers. But even this misfortune did not entirely daunt her. She was, anyway, beginning to lose faith in *The Professor*. Seeds for a new novel, a better novel in quite a different and more romantic Angrian style, were beginning to germinate in her brain. She had been through a period verging on despair but now, though she did not know it, the tide in her affairs had turned. There and then, in the dreary lodgings, with her father lying helpless and silent in bed, she got out her paper and her pencils, and she began to write *Jane Eyre*.

## VII

In September she and her father were back at Haworth. Although convalescence had seemed long and tedious, Mr Brontë had made a very good recovery and by November of that year he was once more taking all the services himself. Charlotte was overjoyed by the success of the operation, but she was still fretted by her own inactivity. 'If I could leave home', she told Ellen, who had been making various suggestions, 'I should not be at Haworth now—I know life is passing away and I am doing nothing, earning nothing—a very bitter knowledge it is at moments—but I see no way out of the mist.' She had had to refuse various favourable offers of employment, and one can only suppose that Mr Brontë himself was determined to keep her, his favourite daughter, at his side. Otherwise, with Emily and Anne both at home at this time, it would not have seemed unreasonable for Charlotte to have found another job. At one time she had longed to go abroad again. There had been a suggestion of Paris. Once, so the Hegers afterwards said, she had suggested going back to



Brussels. But all that was over now. Perhaps her own fires of independence were burning low and she did not really *want* to leave home very much herself.

Her health, never very robust, was affected that winter by the severe weather. She wrote to Ellen: 'The cold here is dreadful. I do not remember such a series of North-Pole days. . . . I cannot keep myself warm. We have all had severe colds and coughs. . . . Poor Anne has suffered greatly from asthma.' Ellen had asked Charlotte for plenty of news but there was little to tell that was pleasant, the most momentous event at Haworth lately having been the visit of a sheriff's officer from Nottingham, demanding payment of Branwell's debts. Charlotte, in consequence of such depressing happenings, developed a phase of self-criticism in which, perhaps dismayed by her own quick temper in dealing with Branwell, she analysed her own shortcomings. 'My humour, I think, is too soon overthrown, too sore, too demonstrative and vehement. I almost long for some of the uniform serenity you describe in Mrs ———'s disposition; or, at least, I would fain have her power of self-control and concealment.' In stressed terms she stigmatizes her weakness for being censorious of others: '*If I were ever again to find myself amongst strangers, I should be solicitous to examine before I condemned.*' And, still more uneasily: 'I generally feel inclined to fight very shy of eccentricity, and have no small horror of being thought eccentric myself.' By early 1847 she was telling Ellen that: 'I look almost old enough to be your mother—grey, sunk and withered.' She was experiencing, she said, 'a loss of strength and deficiency of spirit', though fortunately her toothache was better. Life was very monotonous. She longed to see Ellen again but was determined that Ellen should come to Haworth, rather than that she should go to Brookroyd. Perhaps, in the summer, the visit might be managed; they could be out more and independent of the one room which so often the girls had to share with Branwell. It was March and getting near her birth date: 'I shall be thirty-one next birthday. My youth is gone like a dream.'

Gone like a dream with so little to show for it. 'Very little use



have I ever made of it. What have I done these last thirty years? Precious little.' Perhaps she was thinking of her frustrated literary ambitions, of her novel *The Professor* wending its weary way from one publisher to another, always with the same result—no encouragement, just a bare rejection slip. Her sisters' novels by now had been accepted. A firm of the name of Newby had agreed to publish the two books *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*, in one volume, 'on terms somewhat impoverishing to the two authors'. *The Professor* had not even met with this doubtful fortune. And then, in July of that year 1847, something happened which set Charlotte's hopes soaring once more and fired her to further efforts. She had sent *The Professor* to Smith, Elder of London, and instead of returning it with the usual rejection slip, they wrote her a letter. It was quite a long letter of two pages. Charlotte, who had been expecting 'two hard, hopeless lines' of rejection, read it, trembling, and found that they had written to her courteously, understandingly, considerately, and 'with a discrimination so enlightened, that this very refusal cheered the author better than a vulgarly expressed acceptance would have done'. The publishers told her that they would be pleased to consider another work from her in three volumes. Charlotte was overjoyed. Striking while the iron was hot, she hastily finished *Jane Eyre* and sent it off to them that same month. It had been nearly finished anyhow before she heard from them; it had been written in a fever of composition, usually in pencil, and in little paper books held close to her eyes. Although some days she could not write, on the whole she had been 'possessed'. She had abandoned the stark pedestrian realism of *The Professor* and reverted to Angrian romance, colour, melodrama. Her heroine was a heroine after her own heart. As though in defiance of her fate in being small and plain, Charlotte determined in *Jane Eyre* to produce a heroine who, like herself, was small and insignificant-looking—but, in spite of these disadvantages, she was to be interesting and romantic. Her sisters told her that she was crazy to make such an attempt, that no heroine could attract unless she had some measure of beauty, but Charlotte would not listen. She



# The Professor

a Tale

by

Currer Bell

Chap. 1<sup>st</sup>

Introductory

The other day, in looking over my papers, I found in my desk the following copy of a letter sent by me a year since to an old school-acquaintance

Dear Charles —

I think when you and I were at Eton together, we were neither of us what could be called - popular characters - , you were a sarcastic, observant, shrewd, cold-blooded creature, my own portrait - I will not attempt to draw - but I cannot recollect that it was a strikingly attractive one - can you?

A facsimile of the first manuscript page of *The Professor*. The final title was written on a slip of paper by Charlotte and pasted over the name she originally gave the story, *The Master*



will be a sufficient consolation to both for any little crosses in  
affections - Why don't you invite the Pellets to - shire, Cinn  
worth? I should so like to see your first flame Yvraide -  
Mistress - don't be jealous - but he loved that lady to distress  
I know it for a fact. Brown says she weighs twelve stone  
now - you see what you've lost, Mr Professor -  
Now ~~Sim~~ Monsieur and Madame - if you don't come to  
tea - Victor and I will begin without you".

"Papa come!"

June 27<sup>th</sup> 1846

Finis



would write her Cinderella story, her 'wish-fulfilment' story, and nobody should stop her.

When the manuscript arrived at the office of Smith, Elder, it was given to the firm's chief reader, Mr William Smith Williams, an intelligent, kind-hearted man of middle-age, who took it home with him for the night. As soon as Mr Williams began to read it he was overwhelmed. He could not put it down until he had finished it. Mr George Smith, young but sceptical, was amused by his reader's enthusiasm but could not quite believe in this good fortune. To balance the scales he gave it to another reader—this time to a tough and level-headed Scotsman, Mr James Taylor. Mr Taylor took it home and he, too, was engrossed by the book. He sat up until the early hours of the morning, reading it. With two such trustworthy opinions to recommend it, Mr George Smith began to realize that something very important and unusual had come into his office. It was his turn now to take the manuscript home. He lived with his mother, sisters and young brother in the Paddington neighbourhood of London. Here, in Westbourne Place, on Sunday morning, he shut himself into his study and sat all day, refusing proper meals and eating only sandwiches, until he had finished *Jane Eyre*. The next morning he took it back to his office and wrote a letter of acceptance to the author.

That day, in late August, or early September, of the year 1847, when Charlotte received the letter from Mr George Smith of the firm of Smith, Elder, offering her five hundred pounds for her novel, was the best day of her life. It is not difficult to imagine her tremulous state of mind and her trembling fingers as she opened the letter. All her life she had been inured to disappointment. Nothing had ever gone right for her. And now here was this letter, bearing its message not only of appreciation and encouragement, but also of achievement. Incredulous amazement must have given way at length to delight, to triumph, and then to a deep-rooted intensity of thankfulness that all the effort of years had not, after all, been in vain.



## CHAPTER VI

### *Charlotte and her Sisters*

You know full well as I do the value of sisters' affection to each other; there is nothing like it in the world, I believe, when they are nearly equal in age, and similar in education, tastes and sentiment.

CHARLOTTE TO MISS WOOLER

#### I

**J**ANE EYRE, published with incredible speed by October 16th, 1847, was an immediate success. Most people have read the book and this is not the place for a critical study. It is a book with many shortcomings, but a book of genius. Where *The Professor* was colourless, *Jane Eyre* is vibrant and alive. In this book Charlotte expresses in vivid, pungent prose, and with a startling power of self-expression, the depths and intensity of feeling in her own nature. As Ernest Dimnet wrote in his book, *The Brontë Sisters*: 'This sickly little woman, occupied with the kitchen and linen closet, confined to the narrow ideas and conversation of provincials, had within herself a reserve of passion sufficient for ten lives and a library of novels.' And Augustine Birrell, another of her earlier biographers, emphasizes the same theme: 'That there is a great deal of Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* is certain. There is the same restless, imaginative, responsive, passionate nature under a plain and non-attractive exterior and put to hard service amongst meagre surroundings.'

Almost immediately after the publication of *Jane Eyre* 'Currer Bell' became famous. It was a book which appealed to every class of reader, to the humble as well as the intellectual, to men as well as women. It was reviewed at length in all the important journals of the day and the first edition was exhausted in six weeks. Charlotte, faced with this sudden and amazing success, did not lose her head. There is not a great deal to record of her



feelings at this time, and we only have her letters to her publishers, which are models of friendly courtesy, and her letters to Ellen which show no difference in tone at all and which ignore completely this change in her fortunes. Mrs Gaskell, in her biography, says that she asked Charlotte in later years whether the startling popularity of her novel had taken her by surprise. Charlotte hesitated for a moment and then replied: 'I believed that what had impressed me so forcibly when I wrote it, must make a strong impression on anyone who read it. I was not surprised at those who read *Jane Eyre* being deeply interested in it; but I hardly expected that a book by an unknown author could find readers.'

Although Charlotte was still determined to keep her authorship a secret from the world, and 'Currer Bell' remained a firm incognito to cloak her identity, her sisters persuaded her that, now that her book was such an unqualified success and there was no fear of disappointment, she ought without delay to reveal the secret to her father. There followed then the famous conversation, written down word for word by Mrs Gaskell, as she heard it from Charlotte's lips:

'Papa, I've been writing a book.'

'Have you, my dear?'

'Yes, and I want you to read it.'

'I am afraid it will try my eyes too much.'

'But it is not in manuscript; it is printed.'

'My dear! you've never thought of the expense it will be! It will be almost sure to be a loss, for how can you get a book sold? No one knows you or your name.'

'But, papa, I don't think it will be a loss; no more will you, if you will just let me read you a review or two, and tell you more about it.'

Charlotte then sat down and read some of the reviews to her father and afterwards left him alone with a copy of *Jane Eyre*. Later, when Mr Brontë came in to join his daughters at tea, he greeted them in tones of satisfaction and elation: 'Girls, do you know Charlotte has been writing a book, and it is much better than likely?'



Whatever her outward demeanour, these must indeed have been halcyon days for Charlotte. Even though life went on just as usual at the Parsonage, even though Branwell still drank and in orgies of self-pity bewailed the ruin of his hopes over Mrs Robinson, even though Charlotte at thirty-one felt that her youth was over, and although she had almost given up all hopes of love—in spite of all these things, in that autumn of 1847, Charlotte must have been happy. For now at last she was in touch with the world of the intellect. Now at last she was beginning to know great men. Thackeray had approved of her book, and Leigh Hunt, and G. H. Lewes. It was almost unbelievable. She wrote gratefully to Mr Williams: 'There are moments when I can hardly credit that anything I have done should be found worthy to give even transitory pleasure to such men as Mr Thackeray, Sir John Herschel, Mr Fonblanque, Leigh Hunt and Mr Lewes—that my humble efforts should have had such a result is a noble reward.' For Thackeray particularly Charlotte held the deepest respect and admiration. *Vanity Fair* was at this time being serialized and Charlotte, enjoying it to the full and finding it forcible, exciting and impressive, wrote eagerly to her publisher's reader: 'The more I read Thackeray's works the more certain I am that he stands alone—alone in his sagacity, alone in his truth, alone in his feeling . . . alone in his power, alone in his simplicity, alone in his self-control.' That the admiration was mutual can be confirmed by Thackeray's own statement in later years, when he wrote: 'How well I remember the delight and wonder and pleasure with which I read *Jane Eyre*, sent to me by an author whose name and sex were alike unknown to me; the strange fascination of the book; and how with my own work pressing upon me, I could not, having taken the volumes up, lay them down until they were read through.'

When, after a few weeks, the first edition of *Jane Eyre* was exhausted, Charlotte included with the second edition both a preface and a dedication. In this preface Charlotte thanked her public and her publishers and attacked some of her critics and, as a mark of her very great esteem, she offered the dedication to



Thackeray. She knew, at that time, little of Thackeray as a man, and nothing of his private life, and she had no idea at all that Thackeray, like Mr Rochester, had a mad wife from whom he was separated. Her dismay when she discovered this was overwhelming: 'Well may it be said that fact is often stranger than fiction! The coincidence struck me as equally unfortunate and extraordinary. Of course, I knew nothing whatever of Mr Thackeray's domestic concerns, he existed for me only as an author. . . . But I am *very very* sorry that my inadvertent blunder should have made his name and affairs a subject for common gossip.' Fortunately for her peace of mind, she did not guess at the lengths that 'gossip' had carried speculation, or of the scandal she had created. The novel-reading intelligentsia of London, continually speculating as to the identity of the mysterious and fascinating Currer Bell, now came to the conclusion that the pseudonym concealed the personality of an actual member of Thackeray's household. If it was not an ex-governess then in all probability it was his girl secretary: and one or the other, they now charitably concluded, had quite certainly been his mistress.

Haworth, out of reach of such shocking rumours, remained for Charlotte a haven and protection. Any speculation as to the sex of Currer Bell was a source of irritation and she preferred to imagine that her public thought of her as a man rather than a woman. Women novelists, she had decided, were not taken seriously enough by either the public or the critics. In her correspondence with the many strangers who wrote to her, she signed herself 'C. Bell', and was careful to make no allusion to this vexed question of sex.

Her correspondence at this time was a great interest in her life. She was pleased with a review of *Jane Eyre* by G. H. Lewes, and they had a stimulating exchange of letters in which she professed herself extremely grateful both for his praise and for his advice, their chief divergence of opinion being over the rival merits of Jane Austen. Charlotte had no patience with Jane Austen. G. H. Lewes might praise her to the skies, but to Charlotte she appeared a writer lacking fire, lacking passion, lacking even sensibility, and



completely without poetry. Shrewd and observant—yes. But that was not enough, not nearly enough. One can understand Charlotte, with her wild tempestuous heart, looking askance at Jane Austen's so different world of disciplined limitations and penetrating satire: 'An accurate, daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck!' Charlotte much preferred George Sand. 'Now I can understand admiration of George Sand . . . she has a grasp of mind, which, if I cannot fully comprehend, I can very deeply respect; she is sagacious and profound.'

Such literary discussion must have been meat and drink to Charlotte. All her life, apart from during that brief and abortive relationship with M. Heger, she had been starved of intellectual companionship, except within her own family. Ellen for years had been her friend and confidante; but Ellen was not intellectual, and she was not a critic, and there was a side of Charlotte which to Ellen must, in the nature of things, have been only a closed book. Now for the first time Charlotte had met with correspondents worthy of her mettle. Some of the best letters she ever wrote were those written to Mr Williams, to whom she felt eternally grateful for having first launched her on her literary career, and who now became her chief literary confidante and, in some of the darkest hours of her life, almost her 'father confessor'.

## II

Mr William Smith Williams was a contemplative, quiet and modest grey-haired man with a great store of literary knowledge. He had had an interesting career and had come in contact with great men. He had been friendly with Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt and Keats—and it was, in fact, Mr William Smith Williams, among others, who saw Keats off from England on the last tragic journey to Rome and death. Charlotte now found in him a responsive friend. She knew, of course, that he was married. It



was quite a different friendship from her friendship with M. Heger. In no other letters of Charlotte's—except, perhaps, in the earlier letters to Ellen—is there that note of anguished intensity which characterizes the letters to M. Heger. Charlotte had learned her lesson. She had buttoned up her heart, schooled her unruly emotion; never again was she to expose nakedly to any man her warmth of friendship, her 'besetting sin of enthusiasm', and thus lay herself open to misunderstanding and heartbreak. In future, whatever she felt, she was to keep a stern guard on her feelings, to practise restraint, reticence, to run no risks.

But even with these limitations, the correspondence was comforting. Charlotte, forced all her life by circumstances to be managing and self-reliant, was by nature the kind of woman who craves for masculine sympathy and masculine support, and in Mr Williams she found a fund of wisdom and understanding which suited her. 'If you knew', she wrote, '*how* pleased I am to get a long letter from you, you would laugh at me.' She wrote to him about her family life and tried to help him in his own problems over his daughters' careers. There is something attractive and appealing in Charlotte's lack of worldliness and sophistication. Her letters to her publishers, both to Mr Williams and to Mr Smith himself, show a frank friendliness and simplicity which elicited from them long and friendly letters in return. She was so utterly and transparently sincere.

Apart from the vital fact that she was now in touch with a wider world, and had far wider interests, Charlotte found life at Haworth jogged on much as usual. It was a very severe winter and the inmates of the Parsonage, besides most of the villagers, fell victims to influenza. Mrs Gaskell tells us that Charlotte's life at this time was divided into two separate currents: Charlotte the woman, and Charlotte the author, two currents not always easy to reconcile. But Charlotte's sense of duty was strong and any parish errands that fell her way she was punctilious to carry out as faithfully as possible. Her shyness was always a handicap. Neither she nor her sisters ever cared to call on parishioners unless they had a specific reason for knowing their visit would be



## PASSIONATE SEARCH

welcomed. Mr Brontë himself was busy at this juncture in trying to remedy the appallingly unsanitary conditions of the village. After he had made strong representations to the Board of Health, at length some officials were sent to investigate. It was decided that there were to be no more burials in the over-crowded churchyard and a new graveyard was opened on the hillside. The provision of a proper water supply to all the houses of the village was evidently a more difficult matter, as there was conflict with the rate-payers. So the low typhoid fevers which were a commonplace at Haworth dragged on depressingly.

'I had quite forgotten', Charlotte wrote to Ellen in April, 'till your letter reminded me, that it was the anniversary of your birthday and mine. I am now thirty-two. Youth is gone—gone—and will never come back; can't help it.' She no longer said that she had accomplished nothing, done nothing with her life. Secretly she was sustained by the knowledge of her success, her fame. She had written a best seller, and in her desk was a contract to write two more novels. She had been advised against revising *The Professor*, rather to her disappointment as she knew the Brussels scenes were good (*The Professor* was not published until after her death), and she had already started on *Shirley*. Nothing of this could be confided to Ellen. Partly because of a pledge to Emily, she had to try at all costs to preserve her anonymity. A letter to Ellen about this time denies all rumours of authorship with a spirited indignation and we do not know when Ellen was specifically told of her friend's fame. Perhaps she learned of it through Mary Taylor as, rather inconsistently, though perhaps because Mary was farther away at the back of beyond in New Zealand, Charlotte had sent Mary a copy of *Jane Eyre*, revealing at the same time her own authorship. Mary was amazed. 'It seemed to me incredible', she told Charlotte bluntly, 'that you had actually written a book.' It seems that she had never thought Charlotte had it in her to be so successful. 'Your novel surprised me by being so perfect as a work of art. I expected something more changeable and unfinished. . . . You are very different from me in having no doctrine to preach. It is impossible to



squeeze a moral out of your production. Has the world gone so well with you that you have no protest to make against its absurdities? Did you never sneer or declaim in your first sketches? I do not believe in Mr Rivers.'

By this time Charlotte was not the only established author in the family. The publisher Newby, who for some months had held *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, quickly took advantage of the success of Currer Bell, and two hundred and fifty copies of a combined volume of Ellis and Acton were launched on the public in December 1847. The book was unattractively produced, many errors corrected in the proofs had been left standing, and the volume was not very well received. Emily's genius was to go unrecognized during her lifetime and it was not, in fact, until the seventies that *Wuthering Heights* was acclaimed as the masterpiece it is. At first the critics described it as 'a book that was never likely to find its way into a decent household' and this attitude of outrage and disapproval persisted for many years.

If Emily was disappointed we hear little of her feelings. Charlotte certainly suffered a very real and warm-hearted sympathy on her sister's behalf while Anne, silent, industrious and patiently plodding, turned her back on disappointment, worked steadily at a successor to *Agnes Grey*, and in a very short time produced *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It was now that complications arose and the identity of the three sisters became embarrassingly confused. It seems that the ever-optimistic Newby sold *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to an American publisher, claiming it to be a new novel by the author of *Jane Eyre*, and insisting that, in his considered opinion, Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell were one and the same individual. The original American publisher who had bought *Jane Eyre*, and who had the promise of Charlotte's new book from Smith, Elder, hearing of this, was justly outraged and wrote to London for explanations. Mr George Smith, in his turn, was mystified and indignant, and he wrote a firm letter to Charlotte, asking for enlightenment.

Poor Charlotte, when she received this letter and heard of all that had been going on, was panic-stricken and aghast. That her



revered publishers should suspect her of dishonesty! It was a shattering thought and one that could not be borne for a single instant longer than was necessary. Whatever happened, this charge must at once be refuted, her own innocence and the innocence of her sisters be at once re-established. She and Anne, in spite of the desire to preserve their anonymity, decided that they must immediately go to London. Emily was in favour of letting matters take their course, she said that the confusion did not really matter; but for once the elder and younger sisters took no notice of Emily, and carried on with their preparations. They packed a small box with a change of clothes, put it in a carrier cart for Keighley, and themselves walked the four miles in a thunderstorm to the station. From here they took a train to Leeds and at Leeds caught the night train to London.

Not having slept at all, they arrived in London at eight o'clock in the morning and went at once to the only inn they knew of, the Chapter Coffee-House in Paternoster Row, where Charlotte had stayed with her father on her way to Brussels. Here they must have been decidedly out of place. The inn was frequented almost solely by men—clergymen up from the country or University dons—and there was only one female servant. But such trivialities did not daunt Charlotte and indeed she had always loved the city. She and Anne were quiet and dignified. They ordered themselves a meal, made themselves clean and tidy, and after a little rest they set out again, this time with still more trepidation, on the fateful visit to 65 Cornhill. When making their plans beforehand they had decided to take a cab to the publishers' office, but, in the tension of the moment, this plan of action was forgotten with the result that, uncertain of the way, and baffled by the traffic, they took a whole hour to cover the short distance to their destination. Having at last arrived, they entered what appeared to be a large bookseller's shop and, walking up to the counter, asked to see Mr Smith. They were aware of one or two curious glances but after a short wait they were shown to Mr Smith's room. The young man who rose to greet them was tall, dark, surprisingly youthful—only about



twenty-three—affable and handsome. His expression, perhaps, revealed some of his bewilderment and surprise at being confronted suddenly with these two tiny, dowdily-dressed, nervous ladies, who called themselves the Misses Brown, and who were completely unknown to him. Charlotte grasped the situation firmly by pressing his own letter into his hands. He glanced at it and then stared: 'Where did you get this?' Charlotte could not help laughing at his perplexity. 'I', she said, 'am Currer Bell.'

It was a dramatic moment. Even the suave and sophisticated Mr Smith could not fail to be excited. He hurried out of the room and brought back Mr Williams, 'a pale, mild, stooping man of fifty', to introduce to his momentous visitor. 'Then followed talk—talk—talk', so Charlotte wrote to Mary Taylor later, 'Mr Williams being silent, Mr Smith loquacious. Mr Smith said we must come and stay at his house, but we were not prepared for a long stay and declined this; as we took our leave he told us he would bring his sisters to call on us that evening.' Charlotte's nervous excitement had by this time reduced her to a state of sickness and collapse. Safely back at the hotel, she took a large dose of sal volatile to nerve herself for further ordeals. Sure enough, a few hours later Mr Smith arrived with his sisters, in full evening dress, to take the Brontës to the opera. Hurriedly they changed into the only other dresses they had brought with them, plain, high-necked, country garments, painfully unsuited to the Opera House, and set off by carriage with their escort. The incongruity of the situation in which they found themselves tickled Charlotte's humour. In her letter to Mary Taylor she gives rein to her sense of the ridiculous: 'They must have thought us queer, quizzical-looking beings, especially me with my spectacles. I smiled inwardly at the contrast which must have been apparent, between me and Mr Smith as I walked with him up the crimson-carpeted staircase of the Opera House and stood amongst a brilliant throng. . . . Fine ladies and gentlemen glanced at us with a slight, graceful superciliousness quite warranted by the circumstances. Still, I felt pleasantly excited in spite of head-



ache and conscious clownishness, and I saw Anne was calm and gentle, which she always is.'

Mr Williams remembered afterwards that Charlotte pressed his arm and whispered: 'You know, I am not accustomed to this sort of thing.' The opera was Rossini's *Barber of Seville* which Charlotte only liked with reservations. She and Anne did not get back to their hotel until after one o'clock: 'We had never been in bed the night before, and had been in constant excitement for twenty-four hours. You may imagine we were tired.'

But all was not yet over. The next day or two passed in a whirl of activity. On the Sunday morning Mr Williams came and took them to church (in preference to meeting celebrities Charlotte had stipulated to Mr Smith that she and Anne would prefer to hear the preaching of Dr Croly) and later Mr Smith came in his carriage to take them to dinner at his home. It was an imposing house in Bayswater, with splendid rooms, so Charlotte thought, particularly the drawing-room. In this house George Smith lived with his mother, his two grown-up sisters, a younger brother, and a little sister. They were a good-looking family and the dinner was a fine one. But, wrote Charlotte to Mary: 'Neither Anne nor I had appetite to eat, and were glad when it was over. I always feel an awkward constraint at table. Dining out would be hideous to me.' On Monday the whirl of gaiety continued. In the morning they visited the National Gallery and the Royal Academy, dined again with the Smiths, and went to Mr Williams' home for tea. 'We saw', so Charlotte told Mary, 'his comparatively humble but neat residence and his fine family of eight children. A daughter of Leigh Hunt's was there.' On Tuesday morning they left London, loaded with books which Mr Smith had given them, and returned safely to Haworth. It had been an amazing interlude in their lives—exciting, unbelievable, food for conversation for many days to come—but the strain had been terrific. 'A more jaded wretch than I looked when I returned,' Charlotte wrote, 'it would be difficult to conceive. I was thin when I went, but was meagre indeed when I returned; my face



looked grey and very old, with strange, deep lines ploughed in it; my eyes stared unnaturally. I was weak and yet restless.'

She was pleased and happy but, after years of seclusion, monotony and provincial narrowness of opportunity, the effort entailed, both mental and physical, by this fairy-tale visit to London had almost prostrated her.

### III

Excitement and happiness, undiluted, were short-lived. Before very long it was obvious that trouble with Branwell was intensifying and his future was increasingly frightening to contemplate. 'His constitution', so Charlotte told Ellen in July, 'seems shattered. Papa, and sometimes all of us, have sad nights with him, he sleeps most of the day, and consequently will be awake at night.' She tried to be philosophical. 'Has not every house its trial?' But indeed the scenes with Branwell at that time, and the increasing strain of coping with his outbursts, were difficult to endure and were shattering to the nerves of the occupants of the Parsonage. None of them, however, seems to have realized the seriousness of Branwell's condition and even the doctor had no premonition of his nearness to death. His family put down the aggravation of his condition to the news, which they had lately heard, of the intended marriage of Mrs Robinson to Sir George Scott, the first Lady Scott having recently died. It was all a shabby story, and Charlotte's indignation was fierce and contemptuous. The Robinson daughters, Anne's ex-pupils, were being forced by their mother into loveless marriages in order to get them out of the way. They clung to Anne, writing to her almost every day, making her their confidante. 'Of their mother', Charlotte wrote to Ellen, 'I have not patience to speak; a worse woman, I believe, hardly exists; the more I hear of her the more deeply she revolts me; but I do not like to talk about her in a letter.'

Branwell's agony of mind over his lady's faithlessness, combined with his intemperate habits, had by now reduced him to



a state of physical wreck. Besides suffering from chronic bronchitis and a persistent cough, he had already had fainting fits in Halifax inns, and fallen down in fits at home. At night he frequently became raving and violent, but old Mr Brontë insisted on sharing a bedroom with him and doing his best to quiet him. The sisters were terrified. At night Branwell would announce to them that in all probability either he or the old man would be dead before morning, and in the morning he would tell them: 'The old man and I have had a rough night. He does what he can, the old man, but as for me, I am done for.' Charlotte begged her father not to run such risks but Mr Brontë, whose unselfish devotion to Branwell at this time seems never to have wavered, insisted that he must exert his influence by showing trust rather than fear, and that if anything *could* be done to heal and placate Branwell in his nightly delirium, then he was the one to do it.

All the family, intelligent, affectionate and emotionally highly-strung as they all were, must have suffered terribly in these last tragic months of Branwell's wasted life. That Charlotte herself suffered through his aggressiveness, his scoffing at religion, and the contempt he showed to his family, can be gathered from hints in her letters and writings at a later date. Was she thinking of Branwell when she wrote to Mr Williams of 'human beings who trample on acts of kindness, and mock at words of affection'? Love can survive anything, she says, but *meanness*. She knew, perhaps, of Branwell's disloyalty to those nearest to him, of the way he scoffed at his family to outsiders, and of his customary remark to visiting strangers: 'Sir, I live among barbarians.' Branwell had become an exhibitionist who could not live without notice and admiration: the total waste of his mental gifts, with which he had expected to take the world by storm, had driven him to adopt a pose of desperation and bravado which, though it may have impressed strangers, did not commend itself to those he lived with. That he appeared to take pleasure in boasting of himself as eternally damned and 'one of the fallen' could only rouse bewilderment and bitter disappointment in the hearts of the sisters whose hero he had once been, and who had for so long



believed his talents to be superior to their own. Charlotte, it has been said, lacked pity, and even charity, for her fallen brother. A strange rumour was circulated that for the last two years of his life she never spoke to him. But how untrue this is proved to be by an examination of the evidence still in existence. Branwell himself showed it to be false when he described to a friend his visit to a little Sunday-school pupil who was ill. Branwell was trying to do a good deed, but he feared the girl was dying, and went home with a heavy heart: 'Charlotte observed my depression and asked what ailed me. So I told her. She looked at me with a look which I shall never forget, if I live to be a hundred years old—which I never shall. *It was not like her at all. . . .*'

The key words are the words in italics: *It was not like her at all.* That at times Charlotte could be impatient and sarcastic is undeniable, but in his heart of hearts Branwell knew that fundamentally, when her nerves were not strained to breaking-point, she was charitable and just. She tried her hardest to be fair, to be Christian, but at times it was uphill work. After a visit to Ellen she sat down and wrote to her friend: 'I went into the room where Branwell was to speak to him about an hour after I got home'—and then, bitterness breaking in—'It was very forced work to address him—I might have spared myself the trouble as he took no notice and made no reply—he was stupefied.' It was like beating with bleeding knuckles against a brick wall. She could not leave him to his fate, because always she was longing for improvement and because she minded too much. It was easier for Emily who, happy in her life of mystic detachment, did not really care. Or even for Anne who, gentle and silent, had poured out her anguish and disillusionment in that saga of a drunkard, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. But Charlotte had been betrayed and deserted, her hopes had fallen in ruins, she had lost the love of her youth. All the sisters had a noble integrity of nature. The bond of family meant much to them. Probably, within the limits of their understanding, they all did what they could for Branwell; it is certain that they all suffered. It was the biographer Miss Mary F. Robinson (Mme. Ducloux) who first



spread the story of Charlotte's callousness and hardness, of Emily's long-suffering kindness. Her book, as Laura Hinkley very pertinently points out, was written thirty-five years after Emily's death; she had no personal knowledge of the sisters and, although she professed to have received first-hand impressions of Emily's character from Ellen Nussey, Ellen herself stated emphatically that she did not recognize the resulting portrait. But the myth has persisted: Charlotte, the hard and pitiless, Emily the angel of mercy. Fortunately we have Branwell's own words to refute it: when for once Charlotte had been hard-hearted and momentarily lacking in charity: 'It was not like her at all.'

The end now was drawing very near. It was probably some time during this summer, though the date is uncertain, that Branwell's friend, Francis Grundy, saw him for the last time. Grundy described how he went to the 'Black Bull' and sent a message to Branwell at the Parsonage asking him to dine. Mr Brontë himself was the first to come to the inn. 'Much of the Rector's old stiffness of manner was gone. He spoke of Branwell with more affection than I had ever heretofore heard him express but he also spoke more hopelessly. He said that when my message came Branwell was in bed, and had been almost too weak for the last few days to leave it; nevertheless, he had insisted upon coming, and would be there immediately.' Presently, when Mr Brontë had gone, Branwell himself appeared, his hair uncut and floating round his head, his face gaunt and hollow, the skin yellow, the white lips trembling. There was a strange light of madness in his sunken eyes and Grundy hastily gave him hot brandy to drink. Gradually, after the warm drink and a little food, Branwell grew better, calmer, 'something like the Brontë of old'. He told Grundy that he was waiting anxiously, longingly, for death. 'When at last I was compelled to leave he quietly drew from his coat sleeve a carving knife, placed it on the table, and, holding me by both hands, said that, having given up all thoughts of seeing me again, he imagined when my message came that it was a call from Satan. Dressing himself, he took the knife, which he had long had secreted, and came to the inn, with a full deter-





Mrs. Gaskell. A chalk drawing by George Richmond





Arthur Bell Nicholls



mination to rush into the room and stab the occupant. In the excited state of his mind he did not recognize me when he opened the door, but my voice and manner conquered him, and "brought him home to himself" as he expressed it. I left him standing bare-headed in the road, with bowed form and dropping tears.'

The last existing letter of Branwell's is an undated note to his friend, John Brown: 'Contrive to get me fivepence worth of gin.' Branwell was in the village again two days before his death, when John Brown's brother, William, found him in the lane between the Parsonage garden and the Browns' home, 'quite exhausted, panting for breath, and unable to proceed'. William Brown helped him home and into the house.

In his last illness a change came over Branwell and it seems that his brain cleared and he recovered both his sanity and his affection for his family. On Sunday, September 24th, he lay in bed all day and that night he talked to John Brown of his early life, of his excesses, of his shame and his wasted youth. Strangely enough, he did not mention Mrs Robinson, but dwelt solely on his love and tenderness for his father and sisters. An anguish of remorse seized him but he was calm and self-possessed and suddenly gentle. Early on Monday morning he abruptly grasped his friend's hand: 'Oh, John, I am dying', then turning away, he murmured to himself: 'In all my past life I have done nothing either great or good.' John Brown, realizing that the end was near, left him and called the family to his bedside. At about nine o'clock in the morning he fell into a dying struggle which lasted for about twenty minutes. It is not true that he died 'standing' as some have said; as Leyland writes in his book 'In the last gasp, he started convulsively, almost to his feet, and fell dead into his father's arms'.

Before he died the family had knelt and prayed, and Branwell had said 'Amen' to his father's prayers. Mr Brontë was acutely distressed by this earthly parting, so pitiful, so final: he cried 'Oh, my son, my son!' and it was difficult to comfort him as he was led from the bedside. Charlotte, too, was grief-stricken at Branwell's death. She poured out her heart to her kind friend,



Mr Williams: 'I do not weep from a sense of bereavement—there is no prop withdrawn, no consolation torn away, no dear companion lost—but for the wreck of talent, the ruin of promise, the untimely dreary extinction of what might have been a burning and a shining light. My brother was a year my junior. I had aspirations and ambitions for him once, long ago—they have perished mournfully. Nothing remains of him but a memory of errors and sufferings. There is such a bitterness of pity for his life and death, such a yearning for the emptiness of his whole existence as I cannot describe.'

To Ellen, too, Charlotte wrote of her grief: 'A deep conviction that he rests at last—rests well after his brief, erring, suffering, feverish life, fills and quiets my mind now. The final separation, the spectacle of his pale corpse, gave more acute, bitter pain than I could have imagined. Till the last hour comes, we never know how much we can forgive, pity, regret a near relation. All his vices were and are nothing now. We remember only his woes.'

#### IV

The shock of Branwell's death affected Charlotte's health and a sharp attack of gastritis prevented her from going to the funeral and kept her in bed for a week. Her sisters at first seemed to have withstood the crisis better; Charlotte wrote to Mr Williams on October 9th:

I am thankful to say my father has hitherto stood the storm well; and so have my *dear* sisters, to whose untiring care and kindness I am chiefly indebted for my present state of convalescence.

Colds and coughs were such a normal accompaniment to life at the Parsonage that it was evidently not yet realized how Emily and Anne had been fatally undermined by the strain of the last few years. Emily caught a chill in the bleak autumn wind at her brother's funeral, and when she attended a memorial service at the church, to listen to a funeral sermon for her brother, it was another icy cold day. The villagers remembered afterwards how



pale she looked in her black dress, and in fact this was the last time that she ever went out of doors. By October 29th, Charlotte was writing uneasily to Ellen:

Emily's cold and cough are very obstinate. I fear she has pain in the chest, and I sometimes catch a shortness in her breathing, when she has moved at all quickly. She looks very, very thin and pale. Her reserved nature occasions me great uneasiness of mind. It is useless to question her: you get no answers. It is still more useless to recommend remedies; they are never adopted.

There now began for Charlotte that agonized period of her life when she was forced to watch Emily dying before her eyes and to be powerless to help her. Emily in her last illness was pitiless to herself and pitiless to others. She would see no doctor, take no medicine, accept no nursing. Stoically enduring, she neglected all precautions of health and made no effort to remedy her condition: she accepted uncomplainingly nights of pain and fever and incessant coughing, determined it would seem to prove that the spirit was master of the flesh, and that if only her will was strong enough she would survive undefeated. Every morning, however ill she felt, she got up at seven o'clock and came downstairs, carrying out all her usual duties until ten o'clock in the evening when she went to bed. Such stoicism must have been torture to witness for those who lived with her, but she would brook no interference and became angry at the least mention of help or sympathy. Perhaps as an inheritance from her superstitious Irish peasant ancestry, she did not believe in doctors; when Charlotte, in desperation, called a doctor to the house, Emily refused to see him. Homœopathic aid, as suggested by Mr Williams, was declined also. 'Mr Willams' intention was kind and good,' she said, 'but he was under a delusion. Homœopathy was only another form of quackery.'

With this uncompromising defiance in the face of mortal illness Charlotte felt her own helplessness to be bitter indeed. 'When she is ill there seems to be no sunshine in the world for me,' she wrote to Mr Williams, 'the tie of sister is near and dear



indeed, and I think a certain harshness in her powerful and peculiar character only makes me cling to her more.' And later to Ellen: 'I think Emily seems the nearest thing to my heart in this world', and again: 'She is dear to me as life.' E. F. Benson, in his life of Charlotte, has tried to prove that there was estrangement between the sisters during their lifetime and that Charlotte was frequently harsh and impatient towards Emily, and critical of her for not seeking jobs away from home. But there is no evidence to prove this. All the evidence is, in fact, very much to the contrary and proves Charlotte's overwhelming love and loyalty towards Emily, even though she did not receive an equally great measure of affection in return.

It was a tragedy of Charlotte's life that few of the people she loved were capable or desirous of the intensity of affection which she herself was anxious to bestow. All of these people in turn—Branwell, Ellen, M. Heger, Emily—all failed her. That complete and all-satisfying intimacy for which she searched so intently, so ardently, and which perhaps could not exist except in her imagination, forever eluded her. Disillusioned by Branwell, frustrated by Ellen, abandoned by M. Heger, Charlotte had turned increasingly to Emily with all the hot-blooded devotion of which she was capable—a devotion which had, of course, to a very great degree existed all their lives. It was Charlotte who had realized Emily's desperate homesickness in the old days at Roe Head School and had sent her home to her beloved Haworth. It was Charlotte who, writing to Henry Nussey in May 1841, said of Emily: 'Emily is the only one left at home, where her usefulness and willingness make her indispensable.' It was Charlotte, so M. Heger said in Brussels (and he was a shrewd judge of character), who was the unselfish sister and who, in her anxiety to please Emily, allowed herself to be dominated. And it was Charlotte who wrote to Emily: 'Mine bonnie love, I was as glad of your letter as tongue can express' and 'I received your last letter with delight as usual' and who, after Emily's death, so Mrs Gaskell tells us, was never tired of talking about her sister. No more devoted sister than Charlotte ever existed. Even if she failed



always to understand Emily—and how difficult indeed to understand that rare and strange character—it is surely ludicrous to deny that her affection was absolute.

By November of that tragic year, 1848, Emily's illness was developing swiftly towards its fatal end. On November 23rd, Charlotte wrote to Ellen: 'She is *very* ill. I believe, if you were to see her, your impression would be that there is no hope. A more hollow, wasted, pallid aspect I have not beheld.' In despair Charlotte wrote a letter, through Mr Williams, to a Dr Epps in London, describing Emily's symptoms as clearly as she could, and asking for his advice by post. 'The patient has hitherto enjoyed pretty good health,' she explained, 'though she has never looked strong and the family constitution is not supposed to be robust. Her temperament is highly nervous. She has been accustomed to a sedentary and studious life.' Unfortunately, the doctor's reply when it came was too technical to understand, and anyway it was rapidly becoming obvious that nothing now could save Emily. One of Emily's last poems, 'No Coward Soul is Mine', perhaps reveals more than anything in her life the stoicism and fortitude which sustained her. Up to a few hours before her death she would not give in. Her sisters listened in anguish to her moaning in her sleep at nights, in the daytime to her panting breath upon the stairs. On the evening before she died she insisted on feeding the dogs as usual and, although in her weakness she staggered against the wall, she would not allow anyone to relieve her. Later Charlotte tried to read to her—an essay from Emerson—but she saw after a time that Emily was no longer listening. The next morning Emily rose as usual at seven o'clock and insisted on dressing herself without help. Downstairs in the sitting-room she sat on the sofa that last morning, breathing only with difficulty, in obvious pain, trying feebly to sew. Charlotte had been out on the moors, scouring the country to find one sprig of the heather which Emily had always loved so much, but when she brought the flower home and laid it beside her sister, it seemed that Emily was too ill to see it.

Charlotte sat down and wrote to Ellen:



## PASSIONATE SEARCH

Tuesday December 19th, 1848.

Dear Ellen, I should have written to you before if I had one word of hope to say, but I had not. She grows daily weaker. The physician's opinion was expressed too obscurely to be of use. He sent some medicine which she would not take. Moments so dark as these I have never known. I pray for God's support to us all. Hitherto He has granted it.

Yours faithfully,

C. Brontë.

By noon Emily had grown much worse. She was in such pain that she could hardly speak, but at last she gasped 'If you will send for a doctor I will see him now'. But it was too late. She was obviously dying. Her sisters begged her to allow them to put her to bed upstairs but she did not want to be moved; her restlessness increased and soon after two o'clock she tried to rise, leaning with one hand on the sofa, but fell back dead.

December 23rd, 1848.

My dear Ellen, Emily suffers no more from pain or weakness now. She will never suffer more in this world. She is gone, after a hard, short conflict. She died on *Tuesday*, the very day I wrote to you. I thought it very possible she might be with us still for weeks; and a few hours afterwards she was in eternity. Yes, there is no Emily in time or on earth now. Yesterday we put her poor, wasted, mortal frame quietly under the church pavement. We are very calm at present. Why should we be otherwise? The anguish of seeing her suffer is over; the spectacle of the pains of death is gone by; the funeral day is past. We feel that she is at peace. No need now to tremble for the hard frost and the keen wind. Emily does not feel them. She died in a time of promise. We saw her taken from life in its prime. But it is God's will, and the place where she is gone is better than she has left.

God has sustained me, in a way that I marvel at, through such agony as I had not conceived.



## V

Emily was buried with Branwell and her mother in the vault beneath the church floor. The little gate at the bottom of the garden was unlocked for the funeral procession; Mr Brontë walked at the head of the procession and beside him walked Keeper, Emily's faithful bulldog; they were followed by Charlotte and Anne, and behind them came the servants, Tabby and Martha. And, just as Emily had sickened immediately after Branwell's death, so now it seemed, after Emily's death, the same thing happened to Anne. 'Next day Anne took ill in just the same way', so Martha said afterwards. The family had reached rock-bottom in their years of strain and ill-health. Grief, unhealthy living conditions, frustration, the appalling strain of Branwell's behaviour, all contributed to make a happy breeding-ground for the seeds of tuberculosis to flourish and take root. Charlotte, at this moment, was the member of the family to survive best the stress of circumstance. She wrote to Mr Williams on Christmas Day, 1848:

My father and my sister Anne are far from well. As for me, God has hitherto most graciously sustained me; so far I have felt adequate to bear my own burden and even to offer a little help to others. I am not ill; I can get through daily duties, and do something towards keeping hope and energy alive in our mourning household. My father says to me almost hourly 'Charlotte, you must bear up, I shall sink if you fail me'; these words, you can conceive, are a stimulus to nature. The sight, too, of my sister Anne's very still but deep sorrow wakens in me such fear for her that I dare not falter. Somebody *must* cheer the rest.

Fortunately Anne, in marked contrast to Emily, was a reasonable and tractable patient, willing to do anything to help in her own cure, and anxious to ease the minds of those around her. She is an enigmatic, shadowy character. We do not really know a great deal about her except that she was 'gentle'. Perhaps she was always the most delicate of the Brontës: although capable,



like all the sisters, of perseverance and fortitude, she seems to have had a very low fund of vitality, and no liveliness, even in youth. She was very quiet, very silent, and perhaps often very unhappy. As her poems show, her greatest longing was for a normal woman's life of happily married love and motherhood, and probably the tragic death of Willie Weightman was a shock from which she found it hard to recover. A morbid religious melancholia took a hold on her very early in life and she frequently tormented herself with thoughts of her own unworthiness. Emily's death must have been a final crushing blow to her health and spirits. She loved Charlotte, but it was Emily—strangely enough, as their temperaments were so dissimilar—who was her ally and confidante. In early years they had written the Gondal Chronicles together; it was Anne and Emily alone of the family who had conspired to produce the 'secret papers' describing their thoughts and feelings; it was Emily and Anne who, on Ellen's first acquaintance with them, had seemed so devoted as almost to appear like twins. Now that Emily was dead, Anne's grip on life slipped its moorings. For many winters, in the cold raw climate of Haworth, she had suffered from influenza, asthma, perpetual colds. The sisters were habitually closeted together, in small rooms, with the windows shut. And now, early in 1849, already it was apparent that Anne was following in the wake of Branwell and Emily, and that she, too, had fallen a victim to consumption.

It was indeed only a fortnight after Emily's death that Charlotte and her father learned from the doctor who examined Anne with the stethoscope that her lungs were already badly affected and her case was hopeless. Another doctor, of great skill and experience was called from Leeds to give his verdict. Ellen was on a visit to the Parsonage when this second doctor came; after he had seen Anne, the doctor and Mr Brontë had a consultation together in the study and later Mr Brontë alone joined the girls in the sitting-room. He sat down on the sofa beside Anne and drew her towards him: 'My *dear* little Anne.' It was all he said, but it was enough; later Charlotte told Ellen that the second doctor, too, had diagnosed Anne's case as beyond cure and that he had



even taken such a serious view of it that he recommended that Ellen should cut short her visit and return home.

Charlotte's life now was bounded entirely by the care and anxiety of tending her father and her last remaining sister. There was little to comfort her and she was haunted perpetually by agonized thoughts of Emily's last illness. She tried to find consolation in the affection and sympathy of her friends: 'Dear Ellen, your friendship is some comfort to me. I am thankful for it. I see few lights through the darkness of the present time; but amongst them the constancy of a kind heart attached to me is one of the most charming and serene.' In Mr Williams, too, she found a faithful friend and a willing listener: 'When we lost Emily I thought we had drained the very dregs of our cup of trial, but now when I hear Anne cough as Emily coughed, I tremble lest there should be exquisite bitterness yet to taste. However, I must not look forwards, nor must I look backwards. Too often I feel like one crossing an abyss on a narrow plank—a glance round might quite unnerve. So circumstanced, my dear sir, what claim have I on your friendship, what right to the comfort of your letters? My literary character is effaced for the time, and it is by that only you know me. Care of papa and Anne is necessarily my chief present object in life, to the exclusion of all that could give me interest with my publishers and their connections. Should Anne get better, I think I could rally and become Currer Bell once more, but if otherwise, I look no further: sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.'

Charlotte's first instinct had been to take Anne away quickly to a warmer climate, but Anne was not considered well enough during the winter to be moved. In those days the treatment for tuberculosis involved remaining indoors behind tightly closed windows in an always even temperature. Anne, like Emily, never stayed in bed during her illness for a single day: too weak to work, and scarcely able to read, she sat with Charlotte day after day in the familiar sitting-room on the left of the front door at the Parsonage. Sometimes it seemed that she was really benefiting from all the treatments prescribed by the doctors to which she



so meekly submitted: the medicines, and the blistering, and the exclusion of all fresh air. Although the emaciation increased the fever would lessen and Charlotte's hopes would be correspondingly raised. The milder weather in February that year was beneficial, and with the spring and summer lying not too far ahead Charlotte began to wonder whether she might dare hope a little. Anne herself was uncomplaining and stoical; she did not want to die and had an ever-present fear of causing trouble to others. Both the girls began to long with increasing intensity for the spring. If only March were safely over! But March was a terrible month in that climate and Charlotte dreaded it.

Mr Williams and Mr Smith did their best to show their sympathy by sending parcels of books. 'The choice of books', so Charlotte told Mr Williams, 'is perfect.' Mr Brontë avidly seized on Macaulay's History, and Anne herself made efforts to read some of the lighter volumes. Charlotte's own reading was at this time wide and varied: in her letters to Mr Williams we hear mention of Emerson, Thackeray, Alexander Harris, Tennyson, Leigh Hunt, Ruskin. She asked for one of Godwin's books which she particularly wanted to read, and said that she liked Carlyle 'better and better'. The fact that her own literary career had come to a stop was a continual worry to her, chiefly because she felt that it might be a disappointment to her publishers. A review in the *Quarterly*, too, had upset her. She had been spoken of by the reviewer as 'one who had long forfeited the society of her sex', some readers having apparently been shocked by the fact that in *Jane Eyre* Charlotte had allowed Jane to admit her love for Rochester. Such humbug infuriated Charlotte. She believed in love between the sexes and gloried in it. There was nothing shameful in such feeling and when, months later, a fellow authoress said to her jokingly 'You and I, Miss Brontë, who have both written naughty books', she was bewildered and angry. As a writer she believed in herself and defended her own beliefs. In her writing the secret, passionate, uninhibited side of her nature triumphed over the prim, the censorious, the provincial; and, although she welcomed just criticism, she could never tolerate any



critic who attempted to strike at her bed-rock conception of life and love.

There seemed now little hope that she would be able to finish *Shirley* for some time. With Anne's illness hanging over her, her thoughts were too much 'caught away from imagination, enlisted and absorbed in realities the most cruel'. In the meantime she suggested that she should send, for her publishers' criticism, the manuscript of the first volume which she had managed to complete. She longed to hear what they thought of it. 'I court the keenest criticism', she told Mr Williams in February. 'Far rather would I never publish more than publish anything inferior to my first effort. Be honest, therefore, all three of you. If you think this book promises less favourably than *Jane Eyre*, say so; it is but trying again, i.e. if life and health be spared.' The parcel was in due course sent off, and she waited anxiously for their comments. Fortunately these were favourable on the whole. Mr Smith and Mr Williams both liked the opening chapters, their only criticism being a doubtful reaction to the satire on the curates, and a complaint (which was shared by Charlotte's future suitor, James Taylor) of the 'want of distinctness and impressiveness' in Charlotte's heroes.

There the matter had to rest for the time being. The month of March with its frosts and east winds fulfilled all Charlotte's worst fears, and Anne grew weaker and thinner. Charlotte struggled on heroically with her crushing load of grief and anxiety. She wrote to Miss Wooller:

I have cause to be most thankful for the strength which has hitherto been vouchsafed to my father and myself. God, I think, is specially merciful to old age; and for my own part, trials which in prospective would have seemed to me quite intolerable, when they actually came, I endured without prostration. Yet, I must confess, that in the time which has elapsed since Emily's death there have been moments of solitary, deep, inert affliction, far harder to bear than those which immediately followed our loss. The crisis of bereavement has an acute pang which goads to exertion, the desolate after-feeling sometimes paralyses.



## VI

Anne by now, unaware perhaps of the critical state she was in, had developed a longing to get away somewhere to a more favourable climate, preferably to the seaside. Ellen had asked her for a visit to Brookroyd but Anne felt that she might be a nuisance as an invalid in someone else's house. She suggested instead that Ellen should accompany her to the seaside; Charlotte, she felt, would be unable to leave her father. Anne liked Ellen, and a holiday with Ellen seemed just the thing needed to restore her health. Charlotte immediately saw the drawbacks to this plan and wrote privately to Ellen advising against acceptance. 'Papa says her state is most precarious; she may be spared for some time, or a sudden alteration might remove her ere we are aware. Were such an alteration to take place while she was far from home and alone with you, it would be too terrible. The idea of it distresses me inexpressibly.' Charlotte longed for the project of a holiday to be postponed; she felt that if only they could gain time, get over the capricious month of May, Anne might possibly show signs of improvement. But Anne herself did not want to wait. She had heard from various sources that a change of air to a better climate was nearly always successful in consumptive cases provided it was taken *in time*. She felt that in her own case there was no time to be lost. She knew that she was growing weaker, thinner, more short of breath at the least exertion. She did not want to die. 'I wish it would please God to spare me', she told Ellen in a letter, 'not only for papa's and Charlotte's sakes, but because I long to do some good in the world before I leave it.' Unusually determined, she persisted doggedly in her desire to leave home and to go at once to Scarborough, a place she knew and loved, and where she had stayed more than once with the Robinson family. The doctors were consulted and, though one disapproved, another agreed. Charlotte felt torn between two duties. Ought she to stay with her father, or was it her sterner duty to accompany Anne? Fortunately Mr Brontë himself solved the dilemma. He was in tolerably good health



himself and his concern for Anne was acute: he told Charlotte that she must go.

It was still deemed advisable, however, to wait two or three more weeks. Poor Anne, dosing herself as ordered by the doctors with cod-liver oil, with carbonate of iron, with vegetable balsam, none of which had any lasting good effect, was longing eagerly for the change. The pain in her side was worse and she could not understand why the holiday should be delayed. 'She wonders, I believe,' Charlotte told Ellen, 'why I don't talk more about the journey: it grieves me to think she may even be hurt by my seeming tardiness. She is very much emaciated, far more so than when you were with us: her arms are no thicker than a little child's. The least exertion brings a shortness of breath. She goes out a little every day, but we creep rather than walk.'

Charlotte dreaded the journey. She felt that Anne was unfit to move, that the effort would be too much for her. But, in spite of her fears, Charlotte went ahead with the plans and it was a great relief to her that the faithful Ellen had promised to go with them to Scarborough. They booked some lodgings on the sea front, in a position Anne had chosen, with a view over the sea, and planned to leave home on May 23rd. But when May 23rd came Ellen waited in vain on Leeds station platform for the Brontës to join her. They never came. Something had happened. Either Anne was worse, or the plans had miscarried. Ellen, in great anxiety, hurried the next day all the way to Haworth to find out what was wrong. She found Charlotte and Anne just setting out from the Parsonage; the day before Anne had been too ill to be moved, and even now she had to be carried to the carriage in the lane. Martha's family, watching from their house nearby, remarked among themselves, as they watched her, that death was written in her face.

The journey was accomplished successfully. They went by train from Keighley to Leeds, and from Leeds to York. Here they stayed a night to break the hours of travelling, and they took Anne to see the Cathedral which greatly impressed her. Everywhere on the journey they met with help and kindness. 'We



found assistance', Charlotte told Mr Williams, 'wherever we needed it; there was always an arm ready to do for my sister what I was not quite strong enough to do: lift her in and out of the carriages, carry her across the line, etc.' On the last phase of the journey Anne enjoyed sitting by the window of the railway carriage, watching the country flow past her, drinking in new scenes, new sounds, making an effort to gather strength. The lodgings were pleasant. They had engaged a good-sized sitting-room and large, airy bedrooms overlooking the sea. Anne's godmother had lately died, leaving Anne two hundred pounds, and this money was to be spent in making the holiday as comfortable and beneficial as possible. Anne, excited by the journey and all she had seen, sat contentedly by the window looking out over the sea. Charlotte felt that she was happier, but she had no illusions now that her sister would recover: strangers, seeing Anne, were shocked by her appearance and warned Charlotte that the end could not be far off. Ellen's presence was a solace and Charlotte wrote to Mr Williams, telling him of these last anxious hours of watching: 'Write to me. In this strange place your letters will come like the visits of a friend.' The strain was intense and, as so often in life, Charlotte longed for a staunch masculine assurance of sympathy and compassion to help her through the tragic hours.

The next morning was Saturday and they all went on the beach. Anne was almost too weak to walk for more than a few steps but she hired a donkey cart and drove on the sands for an hour. She always loved animals and was concerned for their welfare, and her last words to the donkey-boy were to beg him always to treat his animal well. On Sunday she longed to go to church but Charlotte and Ellen dissuaded her. In the afternoon they had a short walk and Anne, finding a sheltered seat, asked to be left for a little while as she wanted Charlotte and Ellen to wander farther afield and explore some of the places she herself had loved in the past. 'The evening closed', so Ellen wrote in later years, 'with the most glorious sunset ever witnessed. . . . Anne was drawn in her easy chair to the window, to enjoy the



scene with us. Her face became illumined almost as much as the glorious scene she gazed upon.' The night passed without any apparent change for the worse and Anne rose as usual on that morning of May 28th, 1849, at seven o'clock and dressed herself with little help. By eleven o'clock, however, she began to feel a change and suddenly realized that death was near. If they were to start for Haworth immediately, did the others think, she asked, that she would reach her home alive? A doctor was sent for and Anne asked him to be quite candid and to tell her the exact truth, she was 'not afraid to die'. The doctor reluctantly had to say that death was near and there was little time left. Anne thanked him for his truthfulness. He went away and came back later. Anne now was calm and serene: she had resigned herself to the idea of death, and her last thoughts were for Charlotte and Ellen. She said prayers for them both and told Ellen: 'Be a sister in my stead. Give Charlotte as much of your company as you can', and, as her restlessness increased, and Charlotte wept, she tried to comfort her sister: 'Take courage, Charlotte, take courage.'

She was happy in her religious beliefs: 'Soon all will be well, through the merits of our Redeemer.' Her faith and selflessness sustained her to the end and at two o'clock, at the same time of day that Emily had died on the sofa at Haworth, so too Anne died. So quiet and unobtrusive was her death that just at the moment that Charlotte was closing her dead sister's eyes the midday meal was announced to be ready through the half-opened door.



## CHAPTER VII

# *Charlotte and her Friends*

In the matter of friendship—I have observed that disappointment here arises chiefly, *not* from liking our friends too well, or thinking of them too highly, but rather from an over-estimate of *their* liking for and opinion of *us*.

CHARLOTTE TO MR WILLIAMS

### I

**A**NNE BRONTË was buried at St. Mary's Church, Scarborough. Charlotte arranged this herself, feeling that her father must be spared the anguish of a third funeral at Haworth. She knew that he was involved with parish engagements and she wrote to tell him of her plans, adding that it would be better for him not to come to Scarborough as he could hardly arrive in time. The funeral was a very quiet one, Charlotte and Ellen the only mourners, with a strange lady, who lived in Ellen's neighbourhood and who had sympathized over the tragedy, standing unobtrusively in the background.

When it was all over Charlotte felt worn out. The cumulative sadness and the strain of the last few months had undermined both her health and her spirits. She did not want to go home immediately and her father, realizing how terribly she had suffered, wrote urging her to stay longer at the seaside. Fortunately Ellen was a comfort and mainstay and she was able to be with Charlotte for the next two or three weeks, first at Scarborough, and then at the farmhouse at Easton, near Bridlington, where they had stayed together before. When, at length, Ellen had to return home, Charlotte remained at the farmhouse for a little while longer, alone. She was quiet and sad. Even her love of letter-writing deserted her and we are left with no letters of this period, except a note to Martha, urging her not to tire herself with too much cleaning, and sending a message of love to Tabby.



But this inactivity could not last. The heart-breaking moment of returning home alone had to be faced. Within a month of Anne's death Charlotte had returned to Haworth. It was a tragic homecoming, as she must have known it would be. With two sisters and a brother dead within a year Charlotte was now the only member of that large family left: her father's only surviving child. She described the homecoming to Ellen:

I got home a little before eight o'clock. All was clean and bright, waiting for me. Papa and the servants were well, and all received me with an affection which should have consoled. The dogs seemed in strange ecstasy. I am certain they regarded me as the harbinger of others. The dumb creatures thought that as I was returned, those who had been so long absent were not far behind.

I left papa soon and went into the dining-room; I shut the door. I tried to be glad that I was come home. I have always been glad before—except once, even then I was cheered. But this time joy was not to be the sensation. I felt that the house was all silent, the rooms were all empty. I remembered where the three were laid—in what narrow dark dwellings—never more to reappear on earth. So the sense of desolation and bitterness took possession of me. The agony that *was to be undergone* and *was not* to be avoided, came on. I underwent it, and passed a dreary evening and night, and a mournful morrow; to-day I am better.

I do not know how life will pass, but I certainly do feel confidence in Him who has upheld me hitherto. Solitude may be cheered and made endurable beyond what I can believe. The great trial is when evening closes and night approaches. At that hour, we used to assemble in the dining-room; we used to talk. Now I sit by myself; necessarily I am silent. I cannot help thinking of their last days, remembering their sufferings, and what they said and did, and how they looked in mortal affliction. Perhaps all this will become less poignant in time.

Her stoic determination to endure with patience whatever befell was her chief bulwark during the next months of appalling loneliness. Her fame now was nothing to her. Though the name of Currer Bell might be on everybody's lips, though she had written one of the greatest love stories of all time, there was



nobody now to share her triumph and her previous happiness seemed like a dream. In the isolated Parsonage there was no companionship, nobody of her own age. Mr Brontë, although he loved her, made, it seemed, little effort to break himself of his strangely isolated habits, or to try and relieve her desolation. He still took his meals alone in his study and, when he walked on the moors, he walked alone. He was over seventy now, his health gave him continual cause for alarm, and dyspepsia made him unsociable; but he still had his share of the Brontë stoicism, the self-willed driving force, and nothing would stop him from overtaxing his strength in making long excursions to far-flung parishioners. Often he would come home exhausted and have to go to bed. At the best of times he had always gone to bed early. Prayers were said at eight o'clock and, when prayers were over, Charlotte was left alone for the evening. Tabby was seventy-eight and went to bed early, too. Martha soon followed her. Charlotte sat on in the dining-room, writing by candlelight, or knitting, knitting, alone with her sad memories, listening to the wind moaning round the house, knowing that it was useless to follow the others to bed as, if she did, she could not sleep.

'The two human beings who understood me, and whom I understood, are gone.' The blankness must have been agony to Charlotte's affectionate heart. Who was there now to love? The bereaved, with those on whom they have poured their affections gone for ever, suffer a damming-up of feeling, an emotional void which leaves them bruised and defenceless. 'The loss of what we possess nearest and dearest to us in this world produces an effect upon the character:' Charlotte wrote, 'we search out what we have yet left that can support, and, when found, we cling to it with a hold of new-strung tenacity.' Some of her sadness was relieved by letters to her friends. The two most faithful of these—the two at this time nearest to her heart—were Ellen Nussey and Mr William Smith Williams. 'I have got used to your friendly sympathy', she wrote to Mr Williams, 'and it comforts me', and to Ellen: 'Let me thank you once more, dear Ellen, for your kindness to me, which I do not mean to for-



get.' Both Ellen and Mr Williams seem to have done their best to supply the sympathy and affection which Charlotte so badly needed. They were good friends but they could not completely take the place of Charlotte's beloved sisters. In the really secret chambers of her heart, Charlotte felt that she was now always to be alone.

Realizing this, she decided that work was the best refuge. 'Labour is the only radical cure for rooted sorrow', she told Mr Williams. She decided that she must finish her book, the novel that she had started some months before. In spite of a cold caught at Easton, a persistent sore throat and cough—which, in the light of the family history, must have caused agonies of anxiety to both her father and herself—she took up the novel where she had left off. The chapter heading was written: 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death.' 'Crushed I am not yet', she wrote to Ellen, 'nor robbed of elasticity, nor of hope, nor quite of endeavour. Still I have some strength to fight the battle of life. . . . I have many comforts, many mercies. Still I can *get on*.'

Sitting alone in her empty room, and listening to the clock ticking through the silent house, she tried to build once more a structure of hope upon the ruins of her life. Physically she wilted, but courage and fortitude never deserted her. She wrote long letters to Ellen entering once more into all the details of her friend's circle, showing interest in her concerns, discussing their mutual acquaintance: 'I am glad to hear Ann is going to be married', 'From what you say of Mr Clapham I think I should like him very much', 'Does Rosy Ringrose continue to improve?' To Mr Williams she reported progress with the new novel. By August she had finished it and there were discussions as to the title: *Hollow's Mill* and *Fieldhead* were discarded in favour of *Shirley*. *Shirley* it was to be. It was suggested that a member of the publishing firm, Mr James Taylor, who was on his way back to London from a holiday in the north, should call at the Parsonage and take charge of the manuscript. This seemed to Charlotte an excellent idea. But all the same she was apprehensive about the visit: eager and doubtful in turns. 'Did I see Mr Taylor when I



was in London? I cannot remember him.' She felt inhospitable because she could only ask him to come for the day, and not for a longer visit: her father, she pointed out to Mr Williams, was neither young enough nor strong enough to entertain strangers — 'Without being in the least misanthropical or sour natured, Papa habitually prefers solitude to society, and custom is a tyrant whose fetters it would now be impossible for him to break.' She was eager to make excuses for her father but she felt that there was not much that she could say in defence of her native village: 'Mr Taylor will find Haworth a strange, uncivilized little place, such as, I dare say, he never saw before.'

Whatever Mr James Taylor's first impressions of the village, his first impressions of Charlotte seem to have been altogether happy. This first visit to the Parsonage, when he took back with him to London the manuscript of *Shirley*, was the prelude to a correspondence and a friendship which gradually grew, on Mr Taylor's part, to something more warm-hearted, and which later entailed for Charlotte much heart-searching and uncertainty lasting over a period of many months.

## II

'The book is now finished (thank God). . . . I thought I should be able to tell whether it was equal to *Jane Eyre* or not, but I find I cannot—it may be better, it may be worse. I shall be curious to hear your opinion, my own is of no value.'

So Charlotte had written to Mr Williams at the end of August and now, with Mr Taylor come and gone, she waited in anxious trepidation for her publishers' verdict. Fortunately, apart from a few trifling criticisms, their opinion was favourable: 'On the whole, it was considered no falling off from *Jane Eyre*.' This was an immense relief to Charlotte who, although she believed in her own gifts, and was very loath to alter anything at other people's suggestion, was always very apprehensive of proving a disappointment. She wrote, telling of her relief and delight, both to Mr Williams and to Mr James Taylor, and then settled down,



as she hoped, to a short period of comparative laziness, correcting proofs, reading the books of other writers, and waiting for her own book to be published.

As usual various home troubles soon cropped up to destroy her peace of mind. In August old Mr Brontë had had one of his recurring attacks of bronchitis, and Charlotte had written to Ellen: 'After what has happened one trembles at any appearance of sickness; and when anything ails Papa, I feel too keenly that he is the *last*, the *only* near and dear relation I have in the world.' Now that he was better both Tabby and Martha fell ill at the same time. Martha had a fever and, one unfortunate day while her illness was at its height, a cry from Tabby had called Charlotte into the kitchen where she found the old servant lying on the floor, her head under the grate. She had tried to get up from her chair and, in doing so, had fallen. Mr Brontë, never one to look on the bright side of adversities, had just announced that Martha was in imminent danger, and poor Charlotte, ill herself with headache and sickness, 'fairly broke down for ten minutes, sat and cried like a fool'. Nevertheless she soon took the situation in hand. With the help of a sister of Martha's, she kept both the invalids in bed and did her best to nurse them, as well as doing the work of the house. In after years Tabby told Mrs Gaskell of Charlotte's kindness and care at this time, how 'her own mother could not have had more thought of her nor Miss Brontë had', adding 'Eh, she's a good one—she is!' For they all loved her. Her tongue might at times be caustic, and her impatience might well up in a flood of irritation, but such things were transitory and never enough to veil completely the vast fund of kindness and compassion which lay underneath.

In October 1849 *Shirley* was published and was an immediate success. Reviews appeared in all the important papers and journals, most of them enthusiastic. Any that were not upset Charlotte disproportionately and she was inclined, even, to get angry. This intolerance towards criticism showed, so Sir Edmund Gosse said in after years, an unadult mind and proved that Charlotte's reactions to life were adolescent and that she never grew up.



Though there may be some truth in this, it is not an uncommon fault, and one that is often allied with extreme sensitiveness. The appalling succession of shocks in Charlotte's life had, too, left her sore and on the defensive. There was nobody to talk to. That was part of her trouble. 'Were my sisters now alive they and I would laugh over this notice.' As it was Charlotte could only brood over adverse criticism in secret, magnifying its significance. 'Whenever any shock comes', as she told Mr Williams, 'I feel that almost all supports have been withdrawn.'

It is universally thought nowadays that there is more to criticize in *Shirley* than in *Jane Eyre* or *Villette* and it is the least popular of Charlotte's books. Charlotte took enormous pains in the writing of it, but it was written self-consciously, and with the head rather than the heart. There is little of the passionate intensity of *Jane Eyre*, little of that earlier book's burning sincerity. For Charlotte had been her own severest critic. She had brooded over her own limitations of experience. She had taken to heart the whispered suggestion of other critics that in her limited world love and passion were women's only interests. Whatever happened, she felt now she must, in this second book, broaden her horizons. Her envy of other writers in this respect is shown by her comment to Mr Williams when he compared *David Copperfield* to *Jane Eyre*: 'You said it had affinity to *Jane Eyre*,' she wrote, 'it has, now and then—only what an advantage has Dickens in his varied knowledge of men and things!' With intense and determined industry, before writing *Shirley*, Charlotte studied the social history of her times and incorporated as much of this knowledge as was possible into her new novel. Her horizons in this way were certainly enlarged—but at what a cost! Feeling was sacrificed to observation, imagination to action. There is too much moralizing in the book—the old colourful, pagan, Angrian background, which was at the root of Charlotte's genius, is too much suppressed. The girl Shirley herself is an extroverted and not particularly convincing picture of Emily. In *Caroline Helstone* there is something of Charlotte. But as a novel it lacks unity. It has not the liveliness of *Jane Eyre*. The book's somewhat



morbid obsession with the fate of old maids is a pointer to the trend of Charlotte's loneliness at the time it was written.

Many other portraits in *Shirley*, besides Shirley herself and Caroline Helstone, are taken from life. The Yorkes are Mary Taylor's family. The curates are Mr Nicholls and his colleagues. One cannot help wondering how, with these flagrant portraits from real life, Charlotte hoped to keep up her anonymity. From the first the book had a great popularity with people of the north country. Before long an inhabitant of Liverpool who had once lived at Haworth recognized the curates and immediately reached the conclusion that the only possible author of the book could be Miss Brontë. The conviction spread like wildfire and soon reached Haworth itself. Everybody became very interested and excited. Mr Nicholls, who was lodging with John Brown the sexton, was heard by John Brown's wife, clapping, stamping on the floor, shouting with laughter. She thought for a minute that he had gone wrong in the head. But it was just that he was reading *Shirley* and was enjoying spotting people of his acquaintance: perhaps relieved at finding himself, as Mr Macarthey, described as 'sane and rational, diligent and sober', he was in all the better mood for appreciating the somewhat more caustic satire at the expense of his colleagues. Dashing across the road, he read aloud the best bits to old Mr Brontë who, excited by his daughter's fame, was busily collecting every notice or mention of her in the papers, and sending proud reports to his relations in Ireland. Martha, in the thick of all this activity, could hardly fail to be aware that something unusual was going on. Rumours were circulating on all sides. She came to Charlotte at last, puffing and blowing with eagerness:

'I've heard sich news. . . .' she began.

'What about?' asked Charlotte.

'Please, ma'am, you've been and written two books, the grandest books that ever was seen. My father has heard it in Halifax, and Mr George Taylor and Mr Greenwood and Mr Merall at Bradford; and they are going to have a meeting at the Mechanics' Institute, and to settle about ordering them.'



## PASSIONATE SEARCH

'Hold your tongue, Martha, and be off!' snubbed Charlotte.

She recounted the story to Ellen in a letter, probably flattered, though saying that she had fallen into a cold sweat. Certainly fame could be embarrassing and she did not really enjoy it. She began now to be recognized when she went about. Curious strangers from a long way off made pilgrimages to Haworth and the congregation in church increased visibly in numbers. John Brown did well in tips by pointing Charlotte out to strangers.

### III

Charlotte's life now was certainly changed. The next few years were spent in a see-saw existence of frenzied social effort alternating with spells of depressing solitude. Although her nervousness affected her physical health and made social effort a nightmare, she did not want to miss the many exciting possibilities which her fame had laid open to her. The first of these adventures was a visit to London. It was an undertaking which entailed much thought and the idea of which at first filled her with depression. She could not help remembering the last time she had visited London when her sisters had been alive. Then she had returned to Haworth full of elation and excitement and had recounted it all to Emily—Emily who never went anywhere herself because, she said, 'What is the use? Charlotte will bring it all home to me'. Emily would not be at home waiting for her this time. There would be nobody of her own age to talk to of her impressions. Nevertheless, in spite of such sad thoughts, Charlotte began to be pleasurably excited. There was much that she wanted to discuss with her publishers. Although she hoped for a quiet visit, there were one or two people whom she longed to meet—her god, Thackeray, in particular. The dressmaker was called in and some new dresses were ordered in preparation for the visit. With her morbid fear of over-decorating herself she insisted, so she told Ellen, on these dresses being made 'quite plainly'. But, even so, she was dubious about them. 'I wish', she confided to Ellen, 'you could have looked over them and given a dictum.'



It was towards the end of November 1849 that Charlotte eventually set out for London. She stayed with her publisher George Smith and his family at their comfortable home in Westbourne Place. This visit was a stupendous event in Charlotte's life. London had always been 'the great Babylon' in her thoughts and imagination; to her, it was a place bristling with perils and the pitfalls of that bogey 'worldliness' which she so heartily despised.

She was much relieved to find that, after a very short while, she felt at home and at ease with the Smiths. They were an attractive family, all dark-eyed, dark-haired and handsome, and it seemed that they were bent on putting themselves out to make her comfortable, with a fire in her bedroom night and morning, wax candles and other luxuries. Mrs Smith, so Charlotte told Ellen: 'treats me as if she liked me and I begin to like her much; kindness is a potent heart-winner'. George Smith himself, who had not made too favourable a first impression, now also pleased her: 'I like him better even as a son and brother than as a man of business.'

There were other members in the firm of Smith, Elder, too, with whom to renew acquaintance. Mr Williams, Charlotte decided again, was 'really most gentlemanly and well-informed'. James Taylor, whose interest in Charlotte was increasing, unfortunately failed to make such a good impression. We were not told, at the time of his first visit to Haworth, what Charlotte had thought of him. Now, however, she expressed her opinion to Ellen, and it was not flattering: 'Mr Taylor—the little man—has again shown his parts; in fact, I suspect he is of the Helstone order of men—rigid, despotic and self-willed. He tries to be very kind and even to express sympathy sometimes, but he does not manage it. He has a determined dreadful nose in the middle of his face which when poked into my countenance cuts into my soul like iron. Still he is horribly intelligent, quick, searching, sagacious and with a memory of relentless tenacity. To turn to Williams after him, or to Smith himself, is to turn from granite to easy down or warm fur.'

Such habits of penetrating criticism did not make Charlotte an easy visitor. It seemed to the Smiths that she was never quite at



ease, and her habitual quietness upset strangers who felt uneasy under her brooding silences, and apprehensive lest they were being too mercilessly observed and analysed. With the active, genial George Smith himself, Charlotte was losing much of her shyness. She found him easy to get on with, and he had much perceptive sympathy. In a Memoir which he wrote in the *Cornhill Magazine* of December 1900 George Smith described Charlotte as she appeared to him at that time:

She was very small, and had a quaint old-fashioned look. Her head seemed too large for her body. She had fine eyes, but her face was marred by the shape of the mouth and by the complexion. There was little feminine charm about her; of this fact she herself was uneasily and perpetually conscious. It may seem strange that the possession of genius did not lift her above the weakness of an excessive anxiety about her personal appearance. But I believe she would have given all her genius and her fame to have been beautiful. Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was not pretty.

Poor Charlotte! How much of her thorniness of character, her merciless judgement on those members of the male sex who failed to please her, was due to this rooted conviction of her own unattractiveness? How different would her life have been if she had been born beautiful? Her romantic heart, her longing for love, her passionate intensity of feeling in all human relationships, might then have been assets instead of torments. A conviction of her own power to attract would, too, have given her greater poise, greater confidence, during those nerve-racking days of launching herself on literary London, and when she met Thackeray at last, after all her dreams and longings, she would not have lost all her self-possession and spoken to him 'stupidly'; nor, when she was given the unique opportunity of meeting Charles Dickens, Mrs Trollope, and other interesting celebrities, would she have refused on the grounds that it involved too much 'notoriety'.

As it was, she enjoyed this visit to London, but only with reservations. The strain of her shyness, her lack of social poise, her chronic nervous exhaustion, wrecked and prostrated her. She was



unaccustomed to dinner parties, to late hours, to meeting important people who wished to treat her as an equal. It was all too much of a contrast to her habitual silence, sadness and solitude. And, besides meeting important people, there was so much in London that she wanted to see, so much to do. Whole days were spent in exhausting sight-seeing. She liked the picture-galleries best, particularly the Turner drawings. At the theatre she saw the fashionably popular Macready in *Macbeth* and *Othello* but was disappointed, and shocked her fellow guests at a dinner party by saying so. There were moments like this, when a kind of desperate bravado came over her, and instead of saying too little, she said too much. . . . She was not tactful. Miserably self-conscious, she always imagined that people were criticizing her. She felt that any man after having one good look at her would afterwards keep his eyes averted from her direction. Although she was a good speaker when she was roused, and her eyes then would sparkle and flash with an enthusiasm that was both attractive and infectious, she never realized her own powers of attraction. Nearly everything that she said or did on this visit was fatally undermined by her nervousness and lack of self-confidence.

But, nevertheless, there were bright spots. Looking back afterwards, there was much that she liked to think over with gratification and pleasure. It was something to have met Thackeray in the flesh, even though the meeting had been fraught with disappointment and an uneasy awareness of her own inadequacy. Thackeray had unfortunately arrived to pay his respects at a bad moment; it was seven o'clock in the evening after Charlotte had been out sight-seeing all day, had had nothing to eat since breakfast time and was faint for want of food. She thought him a man of quiet, simple demeanour but found his conversation peculiar and even perverse. Thackeray himself left an account of this meeting which hints that they were at cross-purposes:

I saw her first just as I rose out of an illness from which I had never thought to recover. I remember the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes. An impetuous honesty seemed to me



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to characterize the woman. . . . She spoke her mind out. She jumped too rapidly to conclusions. . . . I found an austere little Joan of Arc marching in upon us, and rebuking our easy lives, our easy morals. She gave me the impression of being a very pure and lofty and high-minded person. A great and holy reverence of right and truth seemed to be with her always.

Nevertheless, to Charlotte, Thackeray was a god, second only to the Duke of Wellington. Harriet Martineau, too, had recently become one of her idols and another of the chief events of this London visit was a meeting with her fellow authoress. Charlotte had already written to her, telling her how much she admired *Deerbrook*, and Miss Martineau had replied rather cryptically, addressing her letter to 'Currer Bell, Esq.' but beginning it 'Dear Madam'. Now Charlotte wrote again, saying she was in London. Would Miss Martineau agree to a meeting? Charlotte was very humble; as a writer and as a woman she felt Harriet Martineau to be her superior, in every way. The meeting was arranged and Charlotte was asked to tea. Miss Martineau afterwards wrote an amusing account of the visit. She had gathered some friends together and they all waited in eager interest and curiosity to see the famous 'Currer Bell', for at that time they were none of them even sure of Currer Bell's sex. When a male visitor, six feet tall, was announced some of the guests became very excited; this, they felt sure, was the new author. They were disappointed, and the footman announced 'Miss Brogden'. Charlotte, who was in such a state of nervous stress that she had been unable to give her name coherently, hesitated at the door for a moment. Then she went forward swiftly and shook hands with her hostess. She had been overcome to see such a gathering of people. Miss Martineau thought her the smallest creature she had ever seen 'except at a fair' but she noticed, too, the silky brown hair and large eyes and 'sensible face indicating a habit of self-control'. After a little while Charlotte managed to shed some of her shyness and to move Miss Martineau and her friends to interest and sympathy with her descriptions of the solitude of the Parsonage and the quiet, lonely existence which made up her life at home.



## IV

But home was where Charlotte was really happiest, for fame had come too late. 'I feel', she wrote to Ellen when she got back, 'as if I had come out of an exciting whirl. . . . My strength and spirits too often proved quite insufficient for the demand on their exertions.' Although she admitted to Mr Williams that she had 'gleaned ideas, images, pleasant feelings, such as may perhaps cheer many a long winter evening', she found it agreeable to relax and to look forward to nothing more exciting than a placid visit from her old friend, Ellen. 'Let nothing prevent you from coming on Thursday', she wrote to Ellen, and her letter to Mr Williams, early in January 1850, stresses too the happiness which this early but lasting friendship still brought to her life.

'You allude [she wrote] to the subject of female friendships, and express wonder at the infrequency of sincere attachments amongst women. As to married women, I can well understand that they should be absorbed in their husbands and children—but single women often like each other much, and derive great solace from their mutual regard. Friendship, however, is a plant which cannot be forced. True friendship is no gourd, springing in a night and withering in a day. When I first saw Ellen I did not care for her, we were school-fellows. In course of time we learnt each other's faults and good points. We were contrasts—still we suited. Affection was first a germ, then a sapling, then a strong tree—now no new friend, however lofty or profound in intellect—not even Miss Martineau herself—could be to me what Ellen is.'

Novelty had no great attraction for Charlotte. She preferred what was enduring, faithful, comforting. Mr Williams himself had been rapidly enrolled in this category and he continued to be her safety valve for many months, the cherished confidante of her over-burdened heart. He had a kind and generous nature and he was faithful in friendship. He would, so Ernest Dimnet thought, have made 'an admirable prey'. But Charlotte never for a moment abused this friendship. He was a married man: she had met his wife and his family. The terrible misunderstanding which had



arisen between her and the Hegers had taught her that never-to-be-forgotten lesson which was strengthened by her natural nobility of character and an integrity which was fundamental to her nature.

All the same, she depended on Mr Williams more and more. Letters, now, were the chief mainstay of her lonely existence. Life at one remove through correspondence was more suited to her than personal participation in a social life which exhausted her. She began to look forward with disproportionate excitement to the post hour. Her fame as a writer brought her much through the post to interest her: letters from strangers, letters from other writers including Thackeray himself, articles in the magazines. Sometimes, too, there were disappointments and shocks. G. H. Lewes's famous review of *Shirley* in the *Edinburgh Review*, in which he stressed her sex, and (in questionable taste) hinted that because she 'had never pressed a babe to her bosom' she did not understand motherhood, made her sore and angry. She wrote him a curt note: 'I can be on guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends.' But, all the same, she forgave him. These pin-pricks, it seemed, were inevitable to an author's life. Even Miss Wooller was supremely tactless in giving Charlotte an earnest assurance that, whatever she had done in the writing line, she was still highly-placed in Miss Wooller's esteem. 'My answer took strong and high ground at once', Charlotte wrote indignantly to Ellen. 'I said I had been troubled by no doubts on the subject. . . . I was aware, I intimated, that some persons thought proper to take exception to *Jane Eyre*, and that for their own sakes I was sorry, as I invariably found them individuals in whom the animal largely predominated over the intellectual.'

Charlotte could put people in their place when it was necessary but she was finding it more and more difficult to keep herself permanently barricaded from a curious world. The most persistent of her admirers at this time was Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth. An eminent and retired doctor who had married an heiress, Sir James was youthfully middle-aged and an inveterate lion-hunter. After a lively correspondence he insisted on calling at the



Parsonage and, having once gained a footing, he became more and more importunate and unflagging in his determination that he and his wife should see more of Charlotte. They wanted her to return to their home with them in their carriage there and then, and it was only with a superhuman effort that Charlotte managed to postpone the evil until the next day. But old Mr Brontë, who had a weakness for titles, was determined that she should not get out of it altogether. So Charlotte had to go through with the visit.

Afterwards she was not displeased that she had gone. Sir James, she admitted, was courtly and fine-looking but she suspected his sincerity as he smiled too much; his wife was younger, only thirty-two, and handsome with a smooth lively face. There were four children and the family lived in a stately house, three centuries old, Gawthorpe Hall in Lancashire. Charlotte was entertained by some pleasant drives to old ruins; and the talks with her admirer, Sir James, did not exhaust her, as usually he indulged in monologues which left her little to do but listen. All the same, the inhabitant of the house who most caught her interest was the German governess. A fellow feeling endeared her to this girl and, wrote Charlotte to Ellen: 'She also instinctively took to me. She is very well treated for a governess, but wore the usual pale, despondent look of her class.'

The visit safely over, Charlotte might have had some peace of mind if only a second invitation from the Shuttleworths—to go to London with them during the season—had not hung over her like a menace. She confided her apprehensions to her two faithful correspondents. 'Would to God', she wrote to Ellen, 'it were well over! I have one safeguard. Sir James has been a physician, and looks at me with a physician's eye; he saw at once that I could not stand much fatigue, nor bear the presence of many strangers . . . but none—not the most skilful physician—can get at more than the outside of these things; the heart knows its own bitterness, and the frame its own poverty and the mind its own struggles. . . .' She took refuge in reading. The parcel of books, so well chosen by her publishers, still arrived regularly, and that spring of 1850 she read Hazlitt's *Essays*, Emerson's *Representative Men* and a Life of



Southey. Southey was a man after her own heart because he was without worldliness; it pleased her that he had found the 'pomp and vanities' of London scaring rather than alluring, and that his chief happiness had centred in home affections. Then there was Miss Austen. Charlotte made yet another determined effort to appreciate her rival by reading *Emma*. But it was no use. In spite of all her efforts she was baffled. 'The passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood.' And, still more vehemently: 'Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (*not senseless*) woman. If this is heresy, I cannot help it.'

Mary Taylor, who had started a shop in New Zealand, wrote Charlotte a long letter in April. She was curious about Charlotte's literary success and felt that surely her fame must have brought her some compensations for the sadness of her life. 'You will somehow get drawn out of your hole and find interests among your fellow creatures. Do you know that living amongst people with whom you have not the slightest interest in common is just like living alone, or worse?' Mary was indignant that so much of Charlotte's time should be sacrificed to the interests of her old father. She had always been in favour of Charlotte's leaving home. 'Shirley is much more interesting than Jane Eyre, who never interests you at all until she has something to suffer. All through this last novel there is much more life and stir that it leaves you far more to remember than the other. Did you go to London about this too?' Mary had made a satisfactory and independent life for herself in New Zealand, but sometimes a nostalgic longing for her old friends assailed her: 'Oh for one hour's talk! You are getting too far off and beginning to look strange to me. Do you look as you used to do, I wonder? What do you and Ellen Nussey talk about when you meet?' She was fated never to have a satisfactory answer to either of these questions, for she and Charlotte were never to meet again.



## V

In spite of a winter of ill-health, and anxiety over her father who had repeated attacks of bronchitis, the year 1850 was an eventful one in Charlotte's life and she achieved what was for her a record number of visits. To her immense relief the projected visit to the Shuttleworths fell through and she was able instead, towards the end of May, to go to London for another visit to the Smiths, which pleased her much better. The Smiths had moved house now and were in Gloucester Terrace, Hyde Park Gardens, but otherwise all was the same as before: Mrs Smith as serene and kind as ever, and her son George, kindly and genial. Charlotte had stipulated beforehand that the visit was to be a quiet one. She enjoyed the Academy, the Opera and the Zoological Gardens. She went to the House of Commons and at the Chapel Royal caught a glimpse of her hero, that 'grand old man' the Duke of Wellington. She met Lewes (who was to describe her later to George Eliot as 'a little plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid, yet what passion, what fire in her!') and had more momentous meetings with Thackeray.

There was something about Thackeray which appealed as a magnet to Charlotte; but their friendship was an odd one as, in her heart of hearts, she disapproved of him and could not help letting him know it. When he made a call, and stayed for two hours while she took him to task over his literary shortcomings, George Smith, who sat in the room all the time, described it afterwards as "a queer scene". The dinner party which Thackeray gave that same night was equally embarrassing. Thackeray's daughter, afterwards Lady Ritchie, has left an account of it. She tells of Charlotte arriving with George Smith—'a tiny, delicate, serious little lady, pale, with fair straight hair, and steady eyes', so small that she hardly reached to Thackeray's elbow. At dinner Charlotte sat gazing at Thackeray 'with kindling eyes of interest, lighting up with a sort of illumination'. She was very grave, very silent, very subdued. Many celebrities were there to meet her: Mr Carlyle, Mrs Carlyle, Mrs Brookfield. Everyone waited for the



brilliant conversation that they had expected, but waited in vain. Miss Brontë murmured a few words to the governess but otherwise all was depression and silence. Mrs Brookfield, grown desperate, leaned forward with a conventional remark: 'Do you like London, Miss Brontë?' Charlotte considered, carefully and gravely: 'Yes—and no.' It is a travesty of a scene, made amusing by the telling of it. Some of the guests afterwards described it as one of the duller evenings that they had ever spent in their lives. Before Charlotte had gone, Thackeray himself, overwhelmed by the solemnity of the occasion, quietly slipped away to his club.

But, although there were social setbacks, Charlotte also had her triumphs. One of the most pleasant aspects of these London visits was provided by the growing sympathy between herself and George Smith. An enigmatic relationship had sprung up between Charlotte and her young publisher. Was it an incipient love-affair or just a kind of flirtation? Ellen asserted in after years that George Smith had proposed to Charlotte, but on the evidence this seems unlikely. However, there appears to be no doubt that George Smith's earlier and somewhat unflattering impressions of Charlotte gave way after a time to an increasing sympathy and interest and that, on Charlotte's part, there was a very definite attraction which she kept ruthlessly in its place.

It was on the occasion of this visit that George Smith, who was shortly going to Edinburgh with his sister to fetch a younger brother home from school, suddenly announced his determination that Charlotte should come to Scotland, too, and join in the sight-seeing. Charlotte was amazed and thought he must be joking. Mrs Smith, too, was surprised and not enthusiastic. She watched over her son very carefully and Charlotte, plain, no longer young, and socially undistinguished, had nothing to recommend her as a prospective daughter-in-law. But George was determined and, as Charlotte said, 'his mother is master of the house but he is master of his mother'. In the end he got his own way and Charlotte agreed to go. She made up her mind, however, to take a very common-sense view of the situation and to let imagination or sentimentality play no part.



'Now I believe [she wrote to Ellen] that George and I understand each other very well, and respect each other very sincerely. We both know the wide breach time has made between us; we do not embarrass each other, or very rarely; my six or eight years of seniority, to say nothing of lack of all pretension to beauty, etc., are a perfect safeguard. I should not in the least fear to go with him to China.'

The visit was a great success. It gave Charlotte some of the happiest hours she had ever spent. She found George Smith a delightful companion and she loved Scotland. 'Edinburgh compared to London', she wrote to her old friend, Laetitia Wheelwright, 'is like a vivid page of history compared to a huge dull treatise of political economy; and as to Melrose and Abbotsford, the very names possess music and magic.'

On her way home she spent a few days with Ellen, and arrived back at Haworth just in time to prevent Mr Brontë from sending a messenger in hot haste to Brookroyd, as he had heard Charlotte was suffering from a cold. Her father's state of feverish anxiety about her health was a continual source of trial to Charlotte, and she had to entreat Ellen, too, to keep off this subject as far as possible. Her own secret fears were probably bad enough, but when other people's anxieties were added, she felt inexpressibly harassed. Can one wonder? Her brother and her sisters, one by one, had all died of consumption and her own symptoms, in those cold northern winters, could at times be frightening.

Now, however, it was summer and she had much to occupy her mind, not least the ambiguous relationship with George Smith. On her return from Edinburgh he continued to be attentive and sent her a picture of her hero, the Duke of Wellington, which he had had especially framed for her. At the same time he sent, as a present to Mr Brontë, the famous portrait of Charlotte by Richmond, now in the National Portrait Gallery, for which she had sat during her London visit. Charlotte acknowledged these gifts with gratitude. Mr Brontë, too, was pleased. He was not altogether satisfied with the portrait—he thought it too old-looking and not particularly flattering—though he acknow-



ledged the expression was good and life-like. Tabby was more critical. She protested that not only was it too old-looking, but it was quite unlike Charlotte. Still, as Charlotte said, as at the same time she insisted that the Wellington picture was a portrait of Mr Brontë, perhaps her opinion was not of great value.

This correspondence between Charlotte and George Smith became, as the weeks passed, increasingly friendly and pleasurable. Charlotte knew that she must keep a watch on herself. For she was no fool. She could look facts in the face. She could see plainly that any idea of marriage between herself and Smith was wildly unsuitable. In *Villette*, her last novel, she portrays George Smith as Graham Bretton or Dr John. 'Lucy must not marry Dr John,' she wrote, 'he is far too youthful, handsome, bright-spirited, and sweet-tempered; he is a "curled darling" of Nature and of Fortune, and must draw a prize in life's lottery. His wife must be young, rich, pretty; he must be made very happy indeed.'

It was no good, therefore, for Ellen to hint that matrimony was in the air. Charlotte knew better and refused to entertain such outlandish possibilities. 'You are to say no more about "Jupiter" and "Venus": what do you mean by such heathen trash?' In more serious mood she tried to explain the situation: 'I think the undercurrent simply amounts to this—a kind of natural liking and sense of something congenial. Were there no vast barrier of fortune, etc., etc., there is perhaps enough of personal regard to make things possible which are now impossible. If men and women married because they liked each other's temper, looks, conversation, nature, and so on, the chance you allude to might be admitted as a chance, but other reasons regulate matrimony, reasons of convenience, of connection, of money. Meantime, I am content to have him for a friend and pray God to continue to me the common sense to look on one so young, so rising, so hopeful, in no other light.'

She knew perhaps, with merciless insight, that, friendly, charming and attentive though George Smith might be towards her, this meant little more than a passing and superficial interest



on his part, and that his affections were in no way engaged. Later on, when he suggested that they might go for a holiday on the Rhine together, she instinctively compared her own feelings with his: 'That hint about the Rhine disturbs me; I am not made of stone, and what is mere excitement to him is fever to me.' Perhaps providentially, nothing came of this idea. Apart from the emotional danger involved, Charlotte cited the objections tersely when she wrote: 'I cannot conceive either his mother or his sisters relishing it, and all London would gabble like a countless host of geese.'

But this was in the future. And in the meantime his friendship, limited though she knew it must be, meant much to Charlotte. She was stronger and healthier that summer and in August she undertook yet another visit, this time to the Kay-Shuttleworths who had taken a house in the Lake District. It was an effort, of course; she went reluctantly, and chiefly to please her father. Nevertheless the visit had a happy outcome for it was there, at 'The Briery' in Windermere, that she met her future biographer, the famous Mrs Gaskell. Charlotte and Mrs Gaskell took to each other at once. 'She is a woman of the most genuine talent', Charlotte wrote to Ellen, 'of cheerful, pleasing, and cordial manners, and, I believe, of a kind and good heart.' Mrs Gaskell, in her turn, was touched and interested. She described the meeting afterwards in letters to her friends—telling of how she arrived at Windermere on a dark evening, drove to the house, and there, already ensconced in the drawing-room with her hosts, was this little lady, so tiny, so thin, so undeveloped, so quiet in manner, wearing a plain black silk dress. They shook hands with one another. And although Mrs Gaskell thought Charlotte very little, and very plain, she saw at once, too, that there was something attractive about her. She noticed her eyes 'very good and expressive, looking straight and open at you', and her sweet voice. But the impression that every spark of merriment had been squeezed from Charlotte made Mrs Gaskell realize the terrible solitude of her life and how much she had suffered.

The visit passed off well and was mostly spent in driving about



the country to admire the beauties of Westmorland. Charlotte, afterwards, was not sorry she had gone, but all the same she was relieved to return home. For unfortunately she was never at ease with Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth and she could not help comparing him, to his great disadvantage, with her former travelling companion, George Smith. Even the scenery suffered through the comparison. 'I fear', she wrote to Mr Williams, 'I seemed to you to speak coolly of the beauty of the Lake scenery. The truth is, it was, as scenery, exquisite—far beyond anything I saw in Scotland; but it did not give me half so much pleasure because I saw it under less congenial auspices. Mr Smith and Sir J. K. Shuttleworth are two different people with whom to travel. I need say nothing of the former—you know him. The latter offers me his friendship, and I do my best to be grateful for the gift; but his is a nature with which it is difficult to assimilate—and where there is no assimilation, how can there be real regard?' Charlotte's preoccupation with the miseries of governessing, which had so bitten into her soul, is again evident in her descriptions of this visit. She and the Shuttleworths' German governess met again in a rush of mutual sympathy: 'She was almost as pleased to see me as if we had been related', Charlotte told Ellen. Charlotte noticed with relief, however, that the children seemed to be fond of the governess and they were also obedient—'two great alleviations of the inevitable evils of her position'.

Back at home again Charlotte pursued her usual life of loneliness, alleviated by correspondence with her friends, including now Mr James Taylor who was becoming increasingly attentive. Charlotte was surprised. She had thought that his first ardour had cooled. However, as she told Ellen in September: 'This little Taylor is deficient neither in spirit nor sense.' Nevertheless she still felt that she was destined to spinsterhood and the idea of marriage in connection with herself appeared laughably remote: 'I wish, dear Ellen, you would tell me what is the "twaddle about my marrying, etc." which you hear. If I knew the details I should have a better chance of guessing the quarter from which such gossip comes; as it is, I am quite at a loss. Whom am I to



marry?' There was nobody, she told Ellen, in the least desirable with whom she had any prospect of a union. It seems, however, that even at this time she may have suspected the gradual change in Mr Nicholls' feelings towards her. In a spurt of confidence, in the same letter, she wrote: 'Doubtless there are men whom if I chose to encourage I might marry.' But at that time Mr Nicholls held no attractions as a prospective suitor. Besides, the idea of marriage was hedged round with so many obstacles. The least allusion to the subject was, so she informed Ellen, 'most offensive to Papa'.

She was busy that autumn with a new literary venture. Smith, Elder had decided to publish a new joint edition of her sisters' books, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, and they wanted Charlotte to write a biographical preface. Charlotte agreed to do this but she found it a hard and a sad task. The reading over of old papers and letters brought on such a depression of spirits, and such a renewal of sad memories, that at moments it was intolerable. 'For one or two nights', she told Ellen, 'I scarcely knew how to get on till morning; and when morning came, I was still haunted with a sense of sickening distress.' Nevertheless, the preface was written and the volume published that November. A copy was sent to a young writer, Sydney Dobell, who had written in admiration of Emily's genius in an article in the *Palladium*, but who had also thought that all the Brontë books were the work of *one* author, written at different times. Charlotte was grateful for his appreciation of her beloved sister. A correspondence started between them in which Sydney Dobell became increasingly ardent. Charlotte, who was now thirty-five, and who felt that her unknown admirer would receive a shock of disenchantment were they to meet, wrote and advised him that he should regard her as 'a grave sort of elder sister'. She also, although no doubt flattered, refused his invitation to visit his home at Cheltenham, or to meet in Switzerland.

Authorship and fame had certainly opened out new vistas to the little obscure governess of the Sidgwick days but a description of Charlotte, written at this time by a visitor to Haworth, does



not give the impression of any sort of glamour, or indeed of anything but a stark simplicity. The surroundings of Haworth affected the visitor unpleasantly: 'A dreary, dreary place literally *paved* with rain-blackened tombstones. . . . There was the house before us, a small oblong stone house, with not a tree to screen it from the cutting wind.' And Charlotte herself? 'Miss Brontë put me so much in mind of her own Jane Eyre. She looked smaller than ever, and moved about so quietly, and noiselessly, just like a little bird. . . . There is something touching in the sight of that little creature entombed in such a place, and moving about herself like a spirit, especially when you think that the slight still frame encloses a force of strong fiery life, which nothing has been able to freeze or extinguish.'

## VI

The writing of her sisters' biographical notice had so depressed Charlotte's spirits that a change became imperative. She therefore in December accepted an invitation from her new friend Miss Harriet Martineau and visited her at her home in the Lake District. For some reason Miss Martineau, robust, healthy and indefatigable—Charlotte's opposite in every way—had inspired Charlotte to a frenzy of excited enthusiasm. All her letters at this time speak of Miss Martineau with an admiration and an intellectual homage which knew no bounds. 'She is', wrote Charlotte, 'a great and a good woman. . . . She is both hard and warm-hearted, abrupt and affectionate, liberal and despotic', 'A woman of wonderful endowments, both intellectual and physical', 'Miss Martineau I relish inexpressibly'. And now this visit was highly enjoyable. Miss Martineau, pursuing her own spartan programme of cold baths and early rising, gave her visitors every liberty to do exactly what they pleased. Charlotte got up late, breakfasted alone, spent the morning alone in the drawing-room and did not even meet her hostess until two o'clock. The rest of the day was spent in talking, working, walking. 'It was delightful', Charlotte wrote to Mr Williams, 'to sit near her in the evenings and hear



her converse, myself mute. She speaks with what seems to me a wonderful fluency and eloquence.' With Miss Martineau to escort her, Charlotte on this occasion seems even to have enjoyed visiting friends' houses. A good deal of time was spent with Dr Arnold and his family at Fox How. Here she met the famous Matthew Arnold, who described her as 'past thirty and plain, with expressive grey eyes, though', and who talked to her of her curates, of French novels, and of the Hegers' school in Brussels. Charlotte meanwhile was registering her own impressions: 'Striking and prepossessing in appearance', she thought him, but 'his manner displeases from its seeming foppery. I own it caused me at first to regard him with regretful surprise.' However, as she had been led to expect, 'Mr Arnold improved upon acquaintance' and, before the end of the visit, she had altered her opinion and admitted that he was both modest and genuinely intellectual under a cloak of affectation and conceit.

The Shuttleworths were again in evidence. Lady Shuttleworth, on the eve of a confinement, stayed at home but the indefatigable Sir James came almost every day to take Charlotte for a drive. Charlotte was touched, particularly as she thought he was looking ill and wasted. Perhaps her previous severity towards him caused her a painful twinge of compunction for now, mellowed and in a happier mood, she wrote to Ellen: 'I begin to admit in my own mind that he is sincerely benignant to me.'

Altogether Charlotte was enthusiastic over this holiday. 'A visit more interesting', she told Mr Williams, 'I certainly never paid.' She returned home with a new store of pleasant memories and much stimulated by the tonic effect of her hostess's amazing fund of vitality. The next four or five months were spent quietly at Haworth. Charlotte made an effort to start on her new novel, but this part of her life is chiefly memorable for Mr James Taylor's courtship, now grown increasingly pressing and drawing towards its climax.

James Taylor, 'the little man', was, as Charlotte herself realized, more promising as a suitor than anybody of her acquaintance, either past or present. Reader and editor to the firm of Smith,



Elder, he was small, red-haired and thick-set, with a bearded face and a vigorous, almost explosive, personality. He had lost his heart to Charlotte and, not only that, Mr Brontë himself both approved and liked him. Ellen was in a ferment of curiosity as always. She was determined that matrimony was in the air but she was not quite sure of the protagonists. George Smith? James Taylor? 'The idea of the "little man",' Charlotte confided in a burst of indiscretion, 'shocks me less, it would be a more likely match if "matches" were at all in question which *they are not*.' Nevertheless Taylor's 'quiet constancy' impressed Charlotte. All the time that he was at a safe distance in London she might even weave dreams about his diminutive figure, fancy that the possibility of romance existed between them, believe that she might one day learn to love him. It was only when she met him face to face at close quarters that she knew this to be impossible. In April he came to Haworth to say good-bye to her as he was shortly to be sent abroad to open a branch of his firm's business in Bombay. She wrote afterwards to Ellen in disillusion: 'Mr Taylor has been and gone: things are just as they were.' She wanted so desperately to love him but when they met in the flesh something froze within her. 'He looked much thinner and older. . . . He is not ugly but very peculiar; the lines in his face show an inflexibility, and I must add, a hardness of character which do not attract. As he stood near me, as he looked at me in his keen way, it was all I could do to stand my ground tranquilly and steadily and not to recoil. . . .'

It is not known whether Mr Taylor actually came to the point of proposing to Charlotte, but it seems certain that he would have done so with any reasonable encouragement. Probably there was at this time some sort of emotional farewell at which he received the impression that Charlotte did not care for him. He wrote again a week or two later to ask her if she could come to London before he left, but Charlotte had planned to visit London later and she did not feel that she could alter these plans. All the same, after Mr Taylor's departure, she became restless and uneasy and doubtful of her own wisdom. All her life she had



hoped for just this: the staunch love of a good man, someone whom she could really call her own. And now, when it had been there, within her grasp, she had rejected it. It was bitterly disappointing. She would have loved him if she could. But, physically, he was unattractive to her. There was no sign of that good breeding which would be an essential to her regard. She felt that, though clever, he was second-rate. She could not, *could* not look up to him. 'No,' she told Ellen, 'if Mr Taylor be the only husband fate offers to me, single I must always remain.' She was too honest to pretend, too idealistic to accept this counterfeit. And yet the loss of that moral support which his attachment had certainly provided in her life left her feeling blank and unhappy and 'in deeper solitude than before'.

For weeks afterwards Charlotte brooded over this affair. In her letters to Ellen she frequently wrote of Mr Taylor and made efforts to analyse her own feelings and to explain to her old friend exactly why the relationship had ended in the way it had. At the same time, one feels from her correspondence that at the back of her mind was a faint hope that in reality the affair was *not* really over. Clement Shorter, Charlotte's early biographer, felt that Mr Taylor had 'caught a firmer hold on her mind and heart' than she would admit, and that if Mr Taylor had hurried back from Bombay to pursue a whirlwind courtship, she would then have accepted him. It is certainly true that Charlotte, unable to let the matter drop, wrote to Mr Williams to ask for a candid opinion of Mr Taylor's character. She had heard rumours of his ill-temper, but instead Mr Williams spoke of him with admiration and respect. Mr Brontë, too, had been surprisingly admiring and approving. He had bid Mr Taylor good-bye with much kindness and, inspired to dramatic fervour, had exhorted him to be 'true to himself, his country, and his God'. Charlotte had been astonished. Could not her father realize her own objections: did not the fact that Mr Taylor was not a gentleman hold any incentive to his disfavour? But no: Mr Brontë dismissed this objection impatiently. Charlotte decided that a five-year hiatus while Mr Taylor sojourned in Bombay must be the attraction.



'I believe', she told Ellen, 'he thinks a prospective union, deferred for five years, with such a decorous reliable personage, would be a very proper and advisable affair.'

But in the event, there was no question of a postponement. Mr Taylor wrote to Charlotte once or twice from India, but his letters were infrequent and more informative than affectionate. It seems obvious that Charlotte's coldness towards him had quelled whatever hopes he may have had of winning her heart. Charlotte herself attached some importance to the correspondence. When the letters did not come, she fretted, and wrote to Ellen of expectation checked by disappointment. The uncertainty of the affair worried and upset her. Finally, but not until some months later, she accepted the depressing fact that all was over between her and Mr Taylor. She wrote to Ellen: 'You ask about India. Let us dismiss the subject in a few words and not recur to it. All is silent as the grave.'

## VII

It was an unsatisfactory winter. It seemed to Charlotte that everything had turned to 'bitterness and ashes' and, besides that, her father was ill. The only excitement was the prospect of another visit to London in May.

This entailed careful preparations, particularly about clothes. Charlotte was investing in a lace cloak and meant to have a black one. Finding that this looked drab over her black satin dress she decided that, greatly daring, the lace cloak should be white. The price, too, was less—the cloak cost only £1 14s. od.—this, she felt, was really quite suitable to her means, and her only hope was that Ellen should not consider her choice 'trumpery'. Besides this important shopping there was much to be done at home: quantities of sewing as well as household matters to arrange. She was feeling unwell with oppressive headaches and looked, so she said, 'grey and thin'. However the change of air, she thought, would probably do her good and she felt comforted to receive enthusiastic notes from both George Smith and his mother in



anticipatory welcome of her visit. Mr Brontë's exaggerated fears for her welfare can be gleaned from her first note to him after her safe arrival: 'I got here quite safely at ten o'clock last night without any damage or smash in tunnels or cuttings.' The Smiths had met her at the station. Their friendship meant much to her, but she was determined not to set too much store by it. As so often in her life, she was afraid of her own feelings, of making exaggerated demands. Moderate expectation would bring moderate reward and avoid much bitter disappointment: for, as she told Mr Williams in a letter, this disappointment 'arises chiefly *not* from liking our friends too well, or thinking of them too highly, but rather from an over-estimate of *their* liking for and opinion of *us*'.

The visit, which lasted a month, was on the whole enjoyable. It was 1851, the year of the Great Crystal Palace Exhibition in Hyde Park. Charlotte went about with the Smiths, received many attentions, visited the Exhibition five times, and met Thackeray again.

There were many triumphs which she related in letters to her father, not because she had a glimmering of conceit about her, but because she knew it would please him. Mr Smith, however, was somewhat changed. 'He looks a little older, darker and more careworn,' Charlotte told Ellen, 'his ordinary manner is graver.' It was on this visit that Charlotte and George Smith, under assumed names, went to see a phrenologist together and the phrenologist was struck by the intellectual development of Charlotte's head, and also spoke of her great capacity for love and her self-distrust. It was the last flickering of that swiftly blossoming and enigmatical sympathy between Charlotte and George Smith which had reached its zenith and was now declining. Charlotte no doubt realized this herself. Even Ellen had cease to tease her about 'Jupiter and Venus'. The letters that Charlotte wrote to Ellen from London were chiefly to tell of her doings, of her attendance at Thackeray's lectures, and of the famous people she had met.

Although she avoided publicity as far as possible, Charlotte



found the hours very heavily occupied and her health suffered. The exhibition in itself was tiring—'like a mighty Vanity Fair' Charlotte described it, and 'appealing too exclusively to the eye and rarely touching the heart or head' but, all the same, most wonderful and impressive. In the intervals of prostration by headache and sickness Charlotte was continually on the move. Thackeray put himself out to be exceedingly kind and attentive and, one one occasion after a lecture, he came straight down from the platform and made his way directly to Charlotte to ask her opinion of his effort. Charlotte, who dreaded any limelight on herself, suffered agonies of nerves on this same occasion when, on her departure, the audience (the 'cream of society') formed itself into two admiring lines, through which she had to pass to reach the door. Such public acclaim which Thackeray accepted for himself and apparently relished, was no attraction to Charlotte. Titled people such as marchionesses and duchesses, in her opinion, savoured of the worldly and when Thackeray, who was 'their pet and darling', offered to take her to the houses of the great and introduce her, she declined the offer with spirit. He, she felt, had not been so much improved by this sort of society that she would be tempted to follow his example.

There were other experiences which appealed to her more, such as breakfasting with the famous patriarch poet, Samuel Rogers, now aged eighty-seven, and famed for his very exclusive breakfast parties of three guests only. There were also visits to picture-galleries, to the Academy, to see Rachel on the stage, and to hear the great French preacher, d'Aubigné, of whom Charlotte wrote nostalgically: 'It was pleasant—half sweet, half sad—and strangely suggestive to hear the French language once more.'

After the irrepressible Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth heard that Charlotte was in London, the pace of her sight-seeing was stepped-up still further. He would have liked her 'to go directly to his house and take up her quarters there'. With the help of Mrs Smith, Charlotte managed to evade this invitation, but there were many other lesser ones which could not be so evaded. She began after a time to think rather longingly of home, and her



father wanted her back. The parlour had been renovated in her absence and the piano, much to her annoyance, relegated to a bedroom; but now all was straight again, and she wrote eagerly that soon she would be coming back, never forgetting in her letters to send her best regards to Mr Nicholls.

On the return journey she paid a long-promised visit to Mrs Gaskell at Manchester and stayed with her for two days. This was a welcome break in her journey; the weather was extremely hot and she was tired out after all her London sight-seeing. Mrs Gaskell, realizing this, did not spur her to any fresh social efforts, but kept her quietly at home, to sit by open windows and talk. Charlotte's only shopping expedition was to choose a large handkerchief shawl as a present for Tabby. She was much taken with Mrs Gaskell's children, particularly little Julia, who possessed herself, so Charlotte told Mrs Gaskell afterwards, of 'a minute fraction of my heart'. These were the first children whom Charlotte had had much chance to mix with as a human being instead of as a governess. She felt herself a stranger to them, wrote of her 'clownish awe', but the fascination was there.

By the beginning of July she was back at home again, feeling better in health and, so she said, fatter, and determined if she could to concentrate on the writing of her new novel. There were bound to be interruptions, however. Mr Nicholls, on the eve of departure to Ireland for a holiday, asked himself to a farewell tea at the Parsonage and made a better impression than usual. In October there was a visit from Miss Wooler which passed off most successfully; after the little disagreements of the past Charlotte now felt a new upsurge of affection towards her old schoolmistress. 'She is like wine. I think time improves her.' Miss Wooler and Mr Brontë, too, got on extremely well; he paid her compliments on her good sense, and Miss Wooler, feeling herself so much appreciated, wrote afterwards to say that not for many days had she enjoyed a visit so much. Unfortunately, after her departure, illness prevailed at the Parsonage. Tabby caught influenza, Martha went to bed with quinsy, and Mr Brontë himself took cold. As usual Charlotte was the stand-by:



'So far I keep pretty well and am thankful for it, for who else could nurse them all? . . . Life is a struggle.' She hinted to Ellen of her mental worries, which were probably connected with the disappointment over Mr Taylor and her uncertainty over the future, and which made her feel disinclined for letter-writing. It was a time of year, too, of sad anniversaries; and in December old Keeper the bulldog died—the last intimate link with Emily.

Ellen hoped that Charlotte would go to Brookroyd for a visit but Charlotte, who had refused other invitations—from Mrs Gaskell, Miss Martineau, etc.—was determined now to stay at home for a time and to concentrate on her work.

That December she bought red curtains for the dining-room—the first curtains we hear of at Haworth Parsonage—but in spite of these efforts to make the house warmer and more comfortable, her health declined. She could not stay in bed for fear of causing her father still greater anxiety, but she was under the doctor for some weeks, suffering from liver inflammation, insomnia, and an extreme depression of spirits—illness which, she realized, had been coming on for some time. A visit from Ellen before Christmas cheered her momentarily, but in the early weeks of 1852 she had a relapse; and when, after much persuasion, she was prevailed upon to make a return visit to Ellen at the end of January her diet was still a very meagre one: no tea, only milk and water, with a little sugar and dry bread, and an occasional mutton chop. In spite of these trying symptoms of weakness and sickness, however, her lungs at this time were declared to be sound. This information, as she told Mrs Gaskell, was a great relief to her father as well as to herself.

## VIII

This year 1852 was a sadder and a lonelier year for Charlotte. Perhaps there was some sort of a reaction from the unusual activity of the preceding year—but there must also have been a feeling of disappointment over certain relationships which had been, over a period of months, both comforting and sustaining.



The world, as Clement Shorter pointed out, soon forgets. Charlotte had left too long a gap after the publication of *Shirley* before producing another book. From now on there was less correspondence with her literary friends in London. James Taylor's departure had left a blank, George Smith was engrossed in the activities of his firm, even Mr Williams wrote less often. Charlotte, depressed by knowing that she was 'disappointing Cornhill', nevertheless found herself unable to do any creative work when she was in low spirits and health, and the realization of this worried her. In June she went away alone to Filey, chiefly because she wanted to visit Anne's grave at Scarborough and correct the lettering on her tombstone, but partly because she felt that she wanted to have a holiday by herself. The change improved her health. She spent a restful fortnight, walking on the sands, watching the rough seas, taking country walks where on occasion she was frightened back by cows! Her letters home at this time are chiefly memorable for their marked change in tone towards Mr Nicholls. She went to a church which 'I should like Mr Nicholls to see'. The congregation were seated in such a way that they had to turn their backs on the pulpit and parson. Mr Nicholls, she felt sure, would have laughed outright. Gradually she was thawing in her attitude towards him and never did she forget to send him her kind regards.

Arriving home, sunburnt and weatherbeaten, she prayed that now she would be able to get on with her work which had, so she told Miss Wooller, 'stood obstinately still for a long while'. A torpid liver, she decided, induced torpid brains. Walking for several hours a day at Filey might, with luck, have provided a cure.

There was another setback, however, in store for her in July, when her father had the threatenings of an apoplectic fit and was in danger for some hours. Fortunately he recovered quickly. Her father's health was always a source of great anxiety to Charlotte. Her life was very much centred in him, and one gathers an impression from her letters that he never hesitated to complain to her whenever he felt tired, weak or depressed. These vicissitudes of



mood and health happened very frequently—‘It is strange how he varies, how soon he is depressed and how soon revived’ Charlotte wrote later to Ellen—and these changes affected Charlotte’s own spirits. There was, however, a very real bond of affection between herself and old Mr Brontë, and in her relationship with him she was invariably long-suffering and patient.

On this occasion to her great relief the doctor was able to reassure her within a few days that all danger was over and to add—which must have cheered her—that her father had an excellent constitution and a good prospect of living for many more years. Nevertheless it was the thought of the future which frightened Charlotte. It was not, she explained to Ellen, because she was a *single* woman that her heart sank at times, but because she was a lonely woman and likely to remain lonely. Ellen’s friendship, always staunch and comforting, sustained her through these moods of low spirits and depression. When things became too much for her, and she felt that she must have some relaxation from her writing and from her solitude, she would ask Ellen to come to Haworth for a few days. ‘Let me see your dear face for just one reviving week’, she wrote. These visits did her ‘inexpressible good’ and gradually, as the year wore on, she was able to finish her book.

The new book was to be called *Villette*. There does not seem to have been any dispute over the title—*Villette* being, of course, Brussels. In the closing stages a terror came over Charlotte that this book might prove a disappointment after the others, and she even tentatively suggested that it might be wiser to publish the book anonymously. Her nervousness carried her to such a pitch that when, after sending off the manuscript, she received only a cheque in return from George Smith without a letter, she was about to take train for London immediately to find out ‘what had struck my publisher mute’. Fortunately the letter arrived in time to prevent this step.

All was well. The publishers were, on the whole, pleased. All the same Charlotte was a little disappointed that she was to receive only five hundred pounds for this novel, the same sum



that she had received for the two others, instead of the seven hundred and fifty pounds which she had expected. But her disappointment was chiefly on her father's behalf and such regrets did not rankle. 'Five hundred pounds', as she told Miss Wooler, 'is not to be despised.'

*Villette* was published in January 1853, and is now considered to be Charlotte's best book. It is written with the same intensity and passionate sincerity as *Jane Eyre* but for the first time a fusion between imagination and reality is achieved. In *Villette* Charlotte returned to the Angrian atmosphere of her early youth—the source of her genius—but she also made use of her own experience. The Pensionnat Heger looms largely. M. Paul and Mme. Beck and Lucy Snowe are the Hegers and Charlotte, thinly disguised. All the anguish and bitterness and ecstasy of that tormenting relationship are here twisted into shape to form a love story of dramatic poignancy. There is more of Charlotte herself in *Villette* than in any of her books. In Lucy Snowe's history we can trace her own creed of fatalistic self-distrust: 'The negation of severe suffering was the nearest approach to happiness I expected to know.' There is the devastating conviction of her own unattractiveness, the abortive love for George Smith depicted as Dr John, the heart-breaking intensity of her feeling for M. Heger. In this novel is depicted that struggle for the triumph of Reason over Feeling which is a clue to the conflict in Charlotte's own life, and the book *Villette* is a masterpiece.



## CHAPTER VIII

# *Charlotte and Arthur Bell Nicholls*

Oh, I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us; we have been so happy.

CHARLOTTE ON HER DEATH-BED

### I

FOR some time past Charlotte had been gradually realizing that her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, was developing an increasing attachment to her. Mr Nicholls, born of Scottish parents, but a native of Co. Antrim and a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, had come to Haworth in 1845. He was a year younger than Charlotte, a dogged, reserved, conscientious man, not at all unattractive in appearance, with black hair and a black beard. From the first Charlotte had been indifferent to him. Her first mention of him in a letter is not auspicious: 'Papa has got a new curate lately, a Mr Nicholls from Ireland. He appears a respectable young man and I hope will give satisfaction', a commendation which appears more suited to a domestic help than a future husband.

She thought him bigoted, unintellectual and uninteresting. Nevertheless as Mr Macarthey in *Shirley* she had given him faint praise and it was this notice taken of him which had, so the villagers thought, given Mr Nicholls encouragement. At all events, for some months past, his behaviour had been giving rise to much curiosity and speculation. He cultivated Charlotte's society whenever possible, and appeared to be brooding in secret. Even Mr Brontë himself had not failed to notice his curate's low spirits, strange feverish moods, threats of emigration, and other symptoms of heart trouble—noticed them, too, with little sympathy and much indirect sarcasm.

It was not, therefore, perhaps very surprising to Charlotte



when, half-way through December of 1852, Mr Nicholls suddenly declared himself.

She wrote a day or two later and, with suppressed but dramatic excitement, described the scene to Ellen:

After tea I withdrew to the dining-room as usual. As usual, Mr Nicholls sat with papa till between eight and nine o'clock, I then heard him open the parlour door as if going. I expected the clash of the front-door. He stopped in the passage: he tapped: like lightning it flashed on me what was coming. He entered, he stood before me. What his words were you can guess; his manner you can hardly realize, nor can I forget it. Shaking from head to foot, looking deadly pale, speaking low, vehemently yet with difficulty, he made me for the first time feel what it costs a man to declare affection where he doubts response.

The spectacle of one ordinarily so statue-like thus trembling, stirred, and overcome, gave me a kind of strange shock. He spoke of sufferings he had borne for months, of sufferings he could endure no longer, and craved leave for some hope. I could only entreat him to leave me then and promise a reply on the morrow. I asked him if he had spoken to papa. He said, he dared not. I think I half led, half put him out of the room.

Charlotte had then gone straight to her father and told him what had happened. Mr Brontë, now aged seventy-five, dyspeptic, and relying almost entirely on Charlotte for the comforts of his existence, was at once outraged and infuriated. The thought of Charlotte marrying had always been a nightmare to him, though lately he had sometimes allowed himself to entertain nebulous dreams of a rich and spectacular son-in-law from London. But Mr Nicholls! An impecunious and insignificant nobody from Ireland earning one hundred pounds a year! The bare suggestion of such a thing worked him into such a transport of rage that the veins stood out on his forehead, and his eyes became suddenly bloodshot, and he very nearly had an apoplectic fit. Charlotte, much appalled by this manifestation of her father's displeasure, made haste to assure him that the very next day Mr Nicholls should have a firm refusal.



Obviously there was nothing else to be done. Her father's attitude was adamant and unbending and besides, much as she pitied Mr Nicholls and his sufferings, she did not love him. So she wrote him a note refusing his offer. But it did not end there. She found out to her consternation that her father had also written a note, a 'most cruel note', which could only bring an added and unmerited misery to poor Mr Nicholls, who already was horrifying his landlady by going without food. So, under the circumstances, there was no alternative but to write to Mr Nicholls again herself; she repeated that she could not love him, but dissociated herself from her father's sentiments and 'exhorted him to maintain his courage and spirits'.

Having received all these communications, Mr Nicholls temporarily left home. Charlotte's own mind was in a turmoil. She and her father both rejected the idea of Mr Nicholls, but on such totally dissimilar grounds that there was no spark of sympathy between them. The match, according to Mr Brontë, would be a degradation, a throwing of herself away on a penniless nobody. Charlotte's own objections were quite different: they arose, as she told Ellen, 'from a sense of incongruity and uncongeniality in feelings, tastes, principles'.

Nevertheless, although her emotions were not involved, Charlotte could not put the matter out of her mind. There was much talk and gossip in the village and she was conscious all the time of Mr Nicholls, going about his business in the parish, lonely, ill, unhappy, and pitied by nobody. 'Martha is bitter against him,' she told Ellen, 'John Brown says "he should like to shoot him"'. They don't understand the nature of his feelings but I see now what they are. He is one of those who attach themselves to very few, whose sensations are close and deep, like an underground stream, running strong, but in a narrow channel.' At first Mr Nicholls had resigned his curacy, but now he wished to withdraw his resignation. Mr Brontë agreed—but only on condition that Mr Nicholls never again broached the 'obnoxious subject' either to him or to Charlotte. This Mr Nicholls could not accept, and so the matter remained in the air, and unsettled. A Missionary



Society abroad had always been a threatened solution. 'I feel persuaded', Charlotte wrote uneasily to Ellen, 'the termination will be his departure for Australia.'

With the matter thus in abeyance Charlotte had to tear herself away from the absorbing problems of Haworth and make another visit to London—the last London visit of her life. Her father wanted her to go—chiefly, she decided, because he had come to the conclusion she would be safer out of the way. And, besides that, there were the proofs of *Villette* to correct, and her publishers were determined not to let the printing go through unless she was herself upon the scene.

The visit this time was different from its predecessors. Charlotte had had enough of being 'lionized' and this time she stipulated that she was to have a quiet time, choosing only the activities which suited her. It was difficult, as usual, to avoid Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, who had written two or three times to find out the date of her arrival, and she decided to postpone letting him know of her presence in London until towards the end of her visit: 'I really so much dread his excited fuss.' As for the Smiths, they were as kind and pleasant as ever, though Charlotte saw some changes. 'On Mr Smith hard work is telling early, the very lines of his features are altered. . . . The weight of work bearing upon him is really fearful.' There was no deterioration, she added, in his mind and manners—rather the reverse. Nevertheless one can sense that the old intimate relationship between them had fallen away: Charlotte was no longer the celebrity of the moment, her own thoughts now were centred elsewhere, and George Smith himself was about to become engaged. They saw little of one another, apart from their joint activities in preparing *Villette* for the press. Realizing that he and his mother were realistically portrayed in this book as Mrs Bretton and Dr John, George Smith was not altogether pleased. He accepted the situation with resignation, as seemed unavoidable, but not without commenting that Lucy Snowe was 'an odd fascinating little puss' and that he was 'not in love with her'.

Charlotte decided that it would be tactful to postpone the publi-



cation of *Villette* until after the publication of Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth*, so that the two books should in no way clash. As a consequence her visit to London was protracted to several weeks. However, she was enjoying herself in a quiet way which suited her, 'seeing rather things than persons' as she told Ellen and selecting in consequence the 'real' rather than the 'decorative' side of life. Her expeditions included visits to two prisons, Newgate and Pentonville, the Foundling Hospital, the Bank, the Royal Exchange and a hospital for lunatics. She was absorbed and impressed by all she saw. It was always her instinct to identify herself with the sufferings of others, and an attitude of detachment was impossible to her. At Newgate prison someone pointed out to her a girl who had killed her illegitimate baby; Charlotte went up to this girl at once and took her hand, not realizing, until she was reminded of it by the warders, that visitors were not allowed to talk to prisoners.

But, in spite of these activities, all of which Charlotte welcomed as broadening and enhancing her understanding of life, something of the glamour of these London visits had gone for ever. That exciting undercurrent of incalculable personal relationship was missing. George Smith was preoccupied, James Taylor was in India (where, so Charlotte heard, there had been complaints of his temper and nerves!) and even the good and gentle Mr Williams was apparently in eclipse. Probably the chief difference lay in Charlotte's own state of mind. In spite of all her efforts she had never really cared for London life, never felt at home in that 'great Babylon', and now there was much to anchor her thoughts and her imagination to Haworth. She had told her father not to write of Mr Nicholls while she was away in terms of abuse; nevertheless the letters Mr Brontë had sent her revealed all too clearly his emotional state and one of them, to give him greater scope, purported to come from the dog Flossy! Charlotte realized that the situation would need careful handling, that there was likely to be more trouble when she got home. 'It is a subject', she told Ellen, 'rather to talk than write about.'

*Villette* was published at the end of January while Charlotte was still in London. It was well reviewed in most of the important



journals. 'The style of *Villette*', wrote the *Spectator*, 'has the same characteristics that distinguished Currer Bell's previous novels—that clearness and power which are the result of mastery over the thoughts and feelings to be expressed, over the persons and scenes to be described.' A discordant note was struck by the *Daily News* in a review which insisted that the book made out love to be too general and absorbing an element in women's lives. Charlotte suspected that this review had been written by her friend, Harriet Martineau, and she wrote to find out, by correspondence, her friend's opinion of the book. She begged Miss Martineau to be entirely truthful. Miss Martineau wrote back in complete candour: 'I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it', and Charlotte was appalled. She defended herself hotly: 'I know what *love* is as I understand it, and if men or women should be ashamed of feeling such love, then there is nothing right, noble, faithful, truthful, unselfish in this earth, as I comprehend rectitude, nobleness, fidelity, truth and disinterestedness.' But it was the end of their friendship. It seemed to Charlotte that by casting the slur of impropriety on the portrayal of what was to her the finest thing in life, Miss Martineau showed a misunderstanding that was unforgivable. 'She has hurt me a good deal', Charlotte wrote, 'and at present it appears very plain to me that she and I had better not try to be close friends.' And, writing later to Ellen: 'The antagonism of our natures and principles was too serious a thing to be trifled with.'

Charlotte and Harriet Martineau never met again.

## II

Now that *Villette* was published, Charlotte could return home. 'My visit has on the whole passed pleasantly enough', she told Ellen, 'but with some sorrowful impressions.' It was arranged that Ellen should meet her at Keighley and return with her to Haworth for a visit. 'I know I can trust you', Charlotte wrote to Martha, 'to have things comfortable and in readiness. The tablecloths had better be put on the dining-room tables; you



will have something prepared that will do for supper—perhaps a nice piece of cold boiled ham would be as well as anything, as it would come in for breakfast in the morning.’

She soon settled back again into the usual routine of the Parsonage: meals to order, servants to manage, her father’s health to be continually taken into account. Domesticity was sweetened by continuous proofs of the success of her literary labours. By every post she received papers with reviews and notices that made her heart swell with thankfulness. Her father, too, was pleased and gratified. He was immensely proud of Charlotte’s success, realizing perhaps, in her, some of those early fiery ambitions of his own life. He and Charlotte were both delighted at this time by the attentiveness of George Smith in sending a framed portrait of Thackeray which was hung at once in the sitting-room, in company with the Duke of Wellington and Richmond’s portrait of Charlotte. Mr Brontë then stood for a whole quarter of an hour in front of this new portrait, examining the great man in detail. A puzzling head, he decided, and features which revealed nothing of the owner’s character.

Braced by success, Charlotte’s health was much better that winter than it had been for some months. She was able, so she told Mrs Gaskell, to take ‘long walks on the crackling snow’ and altogether she felt more cheerful. The problem of Mr Nicholls, of course, was still very much uppermost in her mind and matters were again brought to a head when the Bishop of Ripon visited Haworth and there was a gathering of the clergy at the Parsonage. Charlotte worked hard to make the occasion a success. Help had to be obtained for Martha in the kitchen, there was much bustle of preparation; it was important that everything should go smoothly. ‘It is very well to talk of receiving a Bishop without trouble’, Charlotte told Ellen a trifle tartly, ‘but you *must* prepare for him.’ All the neighbouring parsons were invited to supper as well as tea. And then it was that the unfortunate thing happened. Mr Nicholls demeaned himself ‘not quite pleasantly’. It seemed that Charlotte’s admirer showed his dejection and low spirits so plainly that the Bishop was puzzled; and, still worse, in front of



the Bishop, Mr Nicholls was rude to Mr Brontë. Charlotte decided that her faithful swain's dark gloom was becoming frightening. She could not help pitying him but she did not care for the way he dogged her up the lane after evening service, or for the tormented looks—described by Martha as 'flaysome'—which he gave her when they met by mischance in the passage.

Charlotte regaled Ellen at length with all the details of this courtship. She was heart-whole herself and there seemed no betrayal. It was not like the relationship with M. Heger when, helpless and involved, every nerve had been on edge and she had confided in nobody. For now the roles were reversed. Instead of the loving, she was the loved. It was not a role to which she was accustomed and perhaps at first she did not fill it very gracefully.

But, in spite of this animated reporting in which there is a hint of enjoyment, Charlotte was genuinely sorry for Mr Nicholls. 'He seems', she wrote, 'to pass a desolate life.' After the unfortunate contretemps with the Bishop, Mr Nicholls had finally decided to leave Haworth and he had been offered another curacy at Kirk Smeaton. Meanwhile he existed in sadness and loneliness, speaking to nobody, sitting drearily in his rooms. 'He still lets Flossy go to his rooms and takes him to walk. He still goes over to see Mr Sowdon sometimes and, poor fellow, that is all. He looks ill and miserable. . . . He is now grown so gloomy and reserved, that nobody seems to like him; his fellow curates shun trouble in that shape, the lower orders dislike it. Papa has a perfect antipathy to him, and he, I fear, to Papa. Martha hates him. I think he might almost be *dying* and they would not speak a friendly word to or of him.' How much of this ostracism was deserved, Charlotte was uncertain. Her whole mood was one of uncertainty. Attracted—and yet repelled. Cowed by her father's insensate opposition; impressed, almost against her own will, by such dogged faithfulness. 'I may be losing the purest gem, and to me far the most precious life can give—genuine attachment.'

In the midst of all this uncertainty, Charlotte went away in April for a visit to Mrs Gaskell. She was feeling the strain of events. The Bishop's visit—apart from Mr Nicholls' misdemeanours—



had passed off well: he had seemed, so Charlotte said, a charming and benignant little Bishop and, in return, the Bishop had been impressed with Charlotte's gentle, unassuming manners. But, as soon as he had gone, she had been laid low with one of her crippling bilious attacks—'the reaction consequent on several days of extra exertion and excitement'. Mrs Gaskell noticed at once that her nerves were in a bad state. There was another visitor staying in the house, when Charlotte had expected to find her hostess and her family alone: one strange face was enough to wreck Charlotte's peace of mind and at intervals little nervous shivers would pass over her body. If anything, she seemed less able to cope with strangers than ever before in her life. Two sisters, friends of Mrs Gaskell, had come one day to sing Scottish ballads which, when the ice was broken, Charlotte had enjoyed. But the next day, when she had been asked to pay a return visit, the thought of a third sister to be met was too much for her resolution. She and Mrs Gaskell walked up and down, up and down the street, while Charlotte made desperate efforts to steel her courage to pay the call. But it was no use. Finally Mrs Gaskell had to go in alone and make Charlotte's apologies.

Mrs Gaskell, deeply sympathetic, considered that Charlotte's exaggerated idea of her own unattractiveness was the root cause of her dread of meeting strangers. It seemed that Charlotte had a fixed conviction in her mind that anyone meeting her for the first time was bound to be repelled. 'A more untrue idea', Mrs Gaskell wrote indignantly, 'never entered into anyone's head. Two gentlemen who saw her during this visit, without knowing at the time who she was, were singularly attracted by her appearance; and this feeling of attraction towards a pleasant countenance, sweet voice, and gentle timid manners, was so strong in one as to conquer a dislike he had previously entertained to her works.'

Although there were compensations to this visit, and Charlotte was genuinely attached to the Gaskell family, she found a week's visit long enough, and by the end of April she was back at Haworth. Mr Nicholls' curacy was nearly up and Whit-Sunday would probably be the last time when he would officiate at the



church services. Charlotte stayed for communion on this Sunday and Mr Nicholls, seeing her at the altar rails, was so overcome by emotion that he nearly broke down. It was a trying scene, harrowing for everybody concerned, and Charlotte, writing of it afterwards to Ellen, felt shaken and depressed: 'He made a great effort, but could only with difficulty whisper and falter through the service. I suppose he thought that this would be the last time; he goes either this week or the next.' People in the church had sobbed and Charlotte herself had been hardly able to restrain her tears. Fortunately her father was not present, but the circumstances were soon reported to him, and Mr Brontë, whose sense of compassion had deserted him utterly, was only roused to another fit of anger, and described Mr Nicholls as an 'unmanly driveller'.

Charlotte herself, growing more compassionate every day, was finding her father's hardness more and more difficult to tolerate. She was pleased and relieved when she heard that the parishioners now shared her view and were sympathetic. They spoke of Mr Nicholls with 'commiseration and esteem' and they were clubbing together to give him a gold watch as a testimonial before he left. The churchwardens, suspicious of the turn of events, asked him the reason for his departure: was it Mr Brontë's fault or his own? Mr Nicholls, loyal and dogged, took all the blame on himself. The fault was his own: he did not blame Mr Brontë at all.

Nevertheless, relations between the two clergymen became increasingly strained. At the school 'tea drinking' they both had to be present; Mr Brontë made an effort to be stonily civil, but Mr Nicholls cut him short. 'I am afraid', Charlotte wrote to Ellen, 'both are unchristian in their mutual feelings. Nor do I know which of them is least accessible to reason or least likely to forgive. It is a dismal state of things.'

To her relief Mr Brontë was unwell on the day of the farewell presentation and she persuaded him not to attend it. The presentation took place at a public meeting which went off without incident, but the private farewells still had to be faced. At six



o'clock the evening before he left Haworth Mr Nicholls called at the Parsonage to give Mr Brontë the deeds of the National School and to say good-bye. Charlotte watched the door of the parlour as it closed. She could not wait in the dining-room as she usually did as the room was being washed out and cleaned. 'I could not go into the parlour to speak to him in Papa's presence', she told Ellen. 'He went out thinking he was not to see me, and, indeed, till the very last moment, I thought it best not. But perceiving that he stayed long before going out at the gate, and remembering his long grief, I took courage and went out trembling and miserable. I found him leaning against the garden door in a paroxysm of anguish, sobbing as women never sob. Of course I went straight to him. Very few words were interchanged, those few barely articulate. Several things I should have liked to ask him were swept entirely from my memory. Poor fellow! But he wanted such hope and such encouragement as I *could* not give him. Still I trust he must know now that I am not cruelly blind and indifferent to his constancy and grief.'

Gradually Charlotte's attitude was changing. She was deeply impressed by Mr Nicholls' suffering—for how well she herself knew the agony of such suffering! Mr Nicholls might be unsuitable in some ways but he had much to commend him. He was faithful, loyal, resolute, dependable, and he loved her. One can sense the growing frustration and the undercurrent of rebellion in her mind: the forlorn dismay that the parting of the ways had been forced upon her and the realization that now that Mr Nicholls had left Haworth there would be nothing for her in the future but a bleak and bitter feeling of loss.

'He is gone—gone—and there's an end to it.'

### III

She remained depressed after he had gone. Her letters to her friends now were very short and some of the spark of life and happiness which had sustained her for the last winter months seems to have been quenched. In June she was struck down with a



very bad attack of influenza and had to postpone Mrs Gaskell's promised visit. Gradually she resumed her usual activities but her headaches were long in leaving her. In August she visited Scotland again: this time with Joe Taylor, his wife Amelia and their baby—a visit which unfortunately ended abruptly with a temporary indisposition on the baby's part and a hurried return to England on the part of the frightened parents. In the hurry of changing trains Charlotte mislaid her trunk with all her clothes. Although she enjoyed the short change of scene she felt that her place was really at home with her father who was complaining of weakness and depressed spirits. She was relieved to get back to Haworth, and decided that there should be no more holidays for a time. She wanted, too, to fit in Mrs Gaskell's long promised and deferred visit to the Parsonage. 'Come to Haworth as soon as you can', she wrote, 'the heath is in bloom now; I have waited and watched for its purple signal as the forerunner of your coming.'

Mrs Gaskell came in September of that year 1853. She was her usual kindly self, full of sympathy, curiosity, tact, enthusiasm, and Charlotte welcomed her visit. For Charlotte by now had much on her mind. There were events which she had been keeping to herself, bottled up and smouldering, and which she had not divulged even to Ellen. She longed for a confidante on the spot, and now here was Mrs Gaskell, with whom she had always felt a mutual sympathy, and who was married herself and a woman of understanding. Before very long, in the prolonged fireside talks which were a feature of this visit, Charlotte had revealed to her visitor all the disturbing events of the last few weeks.

For Mr Nicholls, after all, had not tamely accepted his dismissal. True, he had retired to the curacy of Kirk Smeaton, but from Kirk Smeaton he had bombarded Charlotte with letters. He had written to her, altogether, six times before he had succeeded in breaking down her resolution, and then at last she had answered him. She had written to tell him that he must give up hope, submit to circumstances, accept his lot in silence. This letter did not have any effect on Mr Nicholls except to inspire him to renewed persistence, and he wrote pleading with Charlotte to



write to him again as this letter had comforted him so much. And Charlotte's heart had melted. Charlotte, who knew so well the torture of waiting for the post, of anticipating the letter which never came! She answered all his letters from this time onwards and in two months' time a clandestine visit to Haworth was arranged. Mr Nicholls came to stay with Mr Grant, a neighbouring clergyman and—with nothing said to Mr Brontë—Charlotte left the Parsonage day after day and met Mr Nicholls in the fields and lanes. Something in her heart had rebelled against unquestioning acquiescence to her father's wishes. Was it a touch of Angrian fire? A bold and desperate determination not to let fulfilment for ever pass her by? Whatever her motives, she persisted in the friendship and Mr Nicholls had come more than once to stay in the neighbourhood. Charlotte had encouraged him and he loved her more than ever. It was too late now to turn back.

All this story, complicated by Charlotte's feeling of guilt at having deceived her father, was poured into Mrs Gaskell's willing ears and Mrs Gaskell, taking Charlotte's part, was amazed by this elderly daughter's patient docility. For Mrs Gaskell, although she thought Mr Brontë's appearance was striking and his manners courteous, grand and stately, also did not fail to notice that he persisted in treating Charlotte like a child. The life at the Parsonage, too, an existence wrapped in such silence and isolation that the ticking of clocks and the buzzing of flies were sometimes the only sounds to be heard, made a profound and not altogether happy impression on the gregarious Mrs Gaskell. 'The life is like clock-work. No one comes to the house; nothing disturbs the deep repose.' Everything, it seemed, was mapped out in a time-table of routine. Charlotte and Mr Brontë breakfasted together in the study at nine o'clock. After breakfast Charlotte helped with the housework, and at other times she sat alone in the dining-room or walked on the moors. Dinner was at two, but Mr Brontë had his dinner sent in to him. Tea was at six and prayers at half-past eight. By nine o'clock all the household, except Charlotte, were in bed.

Mrs Gaskell's visit provided a welcome break in the monotony of this solitary life. She and Charlotte had so much to say to one



another that the day seemed only too short. Charlotte told Mrs Gaskell all about her childhood experiences, about her dead sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, all about those dreadful, unforgotten, starved days at Cowan Bridge School. She and Mrs Gaskell walked together on the moors, and Charlotte put forward the theory that some people were doomed to sorrow, and that she felt herself to be one of these unlucky ones. Mrs Gaskell, more buoyant, more optimistic, tried to reason her out of this depressed frame of mind but she was not successful. Charlotte 'smiled and shook her head, and said that she was trying to school herself against ever anticipating any pleasure: that it was better to be brave and submit'.

It was a comforting friendship, though not perhaps a very deep one: Charlotte could be unreticent up to a point but there were private places in her heart and mind which were bolted and barred. That seeking after an affinity was conducted more warily now than in the days of her youth, and with fewer illusions. So much had been lost. She knew now that she must come to terms with life as it was. Her armour had thickened. Fundamentally she was the same romantic, emotional person she had ever been, but by now she was better able to hide her vulnerability from the world.

The parting with Mrs Gaskell was friendly and sympathetic. It was agreed that in future if Mrs Gaskell wanted quiet, or if Charlotte wanted bustle, they should let each other know and exchange visits.

Charlotte was certainly cheered at having found a sympathetic confidante but at the same time she was still worried and pre-occupied over the affair with Mr Nicholls. She went away for two visits that autumn, to Ellen and to Miss Wooller, and with both of these women she discussed her problems. Miss Wooller, it seems probable, was in favour of marriage for Charlotte, as two months later Charlotte was writing to her: 'Do not think that your kind wish respecting Mr Nicholls and myself does not touch or influence me; it does both; yet I hardly know how to take the step you recommend.' Had Miss Wooller advised that Charlotte should take the bull by the horns and confront Mr Brontë with the



*fait accompli* of her engagement? Ellen was evidently less approving, as we can guess from an astringent letter written to her in February from Mary Taylor in New Zealand:

You talk wonderful nonsense about Charlotte Brontë in your letter. What do you mean about 'bearing her position so long and enduring to the end'? And still better 'bearing our lot whatever it is'? If it's Charlotte's lot to be married, shouldn't she bear that too? Or does your strange morality mean that she should refuse to ameliorate her lot when it is in her power? How would she be inconsistent with herself in marrying? Because she considers her own pleasure? If this is so new for her to do, it is high time she began to make it more common. It is an outrageous exaction to expect her to give up her choice in a matter so important, and I think her to blame in having been hitherto so yielding that her friends can think of making such an impudent demand. . . .

But if Charlotte had been 'yielding' before, with the New Year she was seized with a new firmness of resolve. She had made up her mind. For so many years she had thought only of pleasing other people and now she was going to please herself. Mr Nicholls came to the Haworth neighbourhood again in January 1854, and wrote to Mr Brontë, asking if he might renew his suit. Permission having been refused, Charlotte went to her father herself. She told him that she liked Mr Nicholls and that she wished to see more of him; she insisted that Mr Nicholls should be allowed to come to the house and that she should be given the chance of 'getting better acquainted'. There was, of course, a scene. Even Tabby joined in, taking Charlotte's part, and asking her employer pertinently if he wished to 'kill his daughter'. Charlotte, when she had really made up her mind about anything, was not easily side-tracked, and finally Mr Brontë was forced to capitulate.

At Easter Mr Nicholls was again in the neighbourhood. Charlotte's affection for him was growing; the only obstacle to an engagement now was Mr Brontë's disapproval of the match. With consummate tact, as in the old days Charlotte had persuaded her aunt to finance the Brussels plan, so she now set out to wheedle her father into a change of heart. Fortunately for the success of her



plan, Mr Brontë was already having trouble with his new curate. Charlotte pointed out how much more satisfactory Mr Nicholls had been in the post. If only Mr Brontë would agree to the marriage, Mr Nicholls could do *all* the work of the parish; they could all three live together at the Parsonage, Mr Nicholls could contribute to the expenses out of his one hundred pounds salary, and Charlotte herself could look after her father's comfort and tend his old age exactly as before.

Mr Brontë's opposition, when faced with these manifold advantages, began to weaken. Perhaps he was influenced, too, by Mr Nicholls' own attitude at this time which, under Charlotte's tuition, became patient and forbearing. At all events, he gave in and Charlotte wrote to Ellen: 'Papa's consent is gained . . . his respect, I believe, is won. . . . In fact, dear Ellen, I am engaged.'

## IV

It was a strange anti-climax to all her dreams. That she realized this herself is implicit in her letters written at this time to her friends. She did not try to conceal the facts of the situation—neither the disappointment to her father nor her own bitter regret that Mr Nicholls was not the lover of her imagination, nor indeed her intellectual equal. 'What I taste of happiness is of the soberest order. I trust to love my husband—I am grateful for his tender love to me. I believe him to be an affectionate, a conscientious, a high-principled man; and if, with all this, I should yield to regrets, that fine talents, congenial tastes, and thoughts are not added, it seems to me I should be most presumptuous and thankless.' She wanted a quiet wedding. July was suggested as a possible date, and she hoped that Ellen would be her only bridesmaid. 'Do not mention these things just yet. . . . There is a strange half-sad feeling in making these announcements. The whole thing is something other than imagination paints it beforehand; cares, fears, come mixed inextricably with hopes.'

It was a final coming to terms with reality. But even reality had its compensations. There was the happiness—a happiness so new



that it seems at first she would hardly admit it to herself—of being loved at last. Mrs Gaskell, perhaps the most discerning of her friends, when she heard of Charlotte's engagement, wrote to John Forster: 'I do fear a *little* for her happiness just because he is narrow and she is not. Good, true, pure and affectionate he is, but he is also narrow, and she can never be so.' But she also wrote 'It must be charming to be loved with all the strength of his heart as she seems to be' and added that Charlotte 'liked to be well ruled and ordered' and that she would never have been happy 'but with an exacting, rigid, law-giving, passionate man'.

Whatever her friends' reactions might be Charlotte, her mind once made up, quietly pursued the course which she had decided upon. Her greatest relief was that her father had now completely abandoned all opposition to the marriage. Perhaps ashamed of his former stubbornness, he told Charlotte more than once how much happier he felt now that everything had been settled, and he began even to look forward to the match and to interest himself in the preparations. His health was better. Mr Nicholls' sentiments towards his future father-in-law were now all that they should be.

In May Charlotte, all her preparations well in hand, went away on some final visits before her marriage. Besides shopping in Leeds which included a 'modest replenishment of my wardrobe' she spent three days with Mrs Gaskell. As usual there was much to talk about. Already Mrs Gaskell could see that some of the 'slight astringencies' of Charlotte's character were being smoothed away into a sweeter, gentler outlook on life. Charlotte was happy making little plans for altering the Parsonage to make way for a newcomer. The peat-room at the back was to be turned into a little sitting-room for Mr Nicholls, and she intended to adorn it with fresh green and white curtains, made with her own fingers. If there were still qualms in her mind about the wisdom of this tremendous step she was about to take, she covered them up with little material activities, blotting out doubt. The immediate aim now was to make these two men happy: her father and her husband. There was much that was satisfying. The future seemed much more secure than it had appeared only a few months before.



Her own health was better though, to her chagrin, a friend on one of her visits had said she was not looking well—'rather ugly as usual: but never mind that, dear Ellen, as indeed you never did'. Mr Nicholls' health was now more important than her own and she worked herself up into a state of apprehension over reports of rheumatism which he was rumoured to be suffering from at Kirk Smeaton. He had not complained to her himself, but she cherished dark fears which she poured out to Ellen: 'I fear, I fear. But, however, I mean to stand by him now whether in weal or woe. The liability to rheumatic pain was one of the strong arguments used against the marriage. It did not weigh somehow. If he is doomed to suffer, it seems that so much more will he need care and help. And yet the ultimate possibilities of such a case are appalling. You remember your aunt.' However, her fears were groundless. Whatever disaster may have befallen Ellen's aunt, Mr Nicholls' ills, it seems, were largely of his own making. Instead of sympathy, it was scolding that he needed: a chastisement which, as soon as he came to Haworth, Charlotte did not hesitate to administer. He went away, much better. 'Man is indeed an amazing piece of mechanism when you see, so to speak, the full weakness of what he calls his strength. There is not a female child above the age of eight but might rebuke him for spoilt petulance of his wilful nonsense. I bought a border for the table-cloth and have put it on.'

Charlotte was evidently enjoying herself. It was a new experience for her to have a human being under her hands like this, to spoil or scold, to tease or pamper. It was what she had always wanted: somebody completely belonging to her. But she professed herself very strong-minded, very unromantic: 'I want to clear up my needlework a little and have been sewing against time since I was at Brookroyd. Mr Nicholls hindered me a full week. . . . I like the card very well, but not the envelope. I should like a perfectly plain envelope with a silver initial. . . . I got my dresses from Halifax a day or two since, but have not had time to have them unpacked, so I don't know what they are like.'

At last the arrangements were all made and the wedding was



fixed for June 29th. Charlotte wanted the wedding to be very quiet and the ceremony was fixed for eight o'clock in the morning, the actual time to be kept a secret from the parishioners. Her two old friends, Ellen Nussey and Miss Wooler, were, however, to be welcome guests and Charlotte wrote anxious instructions to Ellen: 'Would it not be better, dear Nell, if you and she [Miss Wooler] could arrange to come to Haworth on the same day, arrive at Keighley by the same train, then I could order the cab to meet you at the station and bring you on with your luggage: in this hot weather walking would be quite out of the question. . . . Be sure to give me timely information that I may write to the Devonshire Arms about a cab.' And then, with obvious pride: 'Mr Nicholls is a kind, considerate fellow, with all his masculine faults in some points; he enters into my wishes about having the thing done quietly, in a way which makes me grateful. . . . He is so thoughtful too about "the ladies" i.e., you and Miss Wooler—anticipating the very arrangements I was going to propose.'

The two friends arrived at the Parsonage the day before the wedding. The last afternoon was spent by Charlotte in busy preparations for the great day and in making arrangements for the household to carry on while she was on her honeymoon. And then, later in the evening, old Mr Brontë, who of course was to give her away at the service, suddenly announced that he could not do it after all. He was, so he said, unwell. He must stay at home and not take part in the ceremony at all.

Coming at such a late hour, this announcement was a great shock. Mrs Gaskell describes the scene: 'What was to be done? Who was to give the bride away? There was only to be the officiating clergyman, the bride and the bridegroom, the bridesmaid and Miss Wooler present. The Prayer-book was referred to; and then it was seen that the Minister shall receive "the woman from her father's or *friend's* hand", and that nothing is specified as to the sex of the "friend". So Miss Wooler, ever kind in emergency, volunteered to give her old pupil away.'

The wedding dress was of white embroidered muslin—the precious wedding dress which in later years was left by Mr



Nicholls to his niece with strict instructions that she was to keep it always and on no account part with it, and which was burnt by his niece before her death as she was getting old and dared not disobey her uncle's instructions. With the dress Charlotte wore a lace mantle and a white bonnet trimmed with green leaves. The villagers, who had somehow got to hear of the time of the ceremony and were waiting outside the church, thought that she looked like 'a snow-drop' as she came out on her husband's arm.

The honeymoon was spent in Ireland. Charlotte's going-away clothes were grey: a grey dress, grey cashmere shawl, grey silk bonnet trimmed with pink roses. After travelling by train to North Wales, they crossed to Dublin. They visited Killarney, Glengarriff, Cork, Tralee. Every new scene impressed Charlotte profoundly. As in the old days with Ellen, she asked to be left alone with the sea until she had mastered her emotions: Mr Nicholls tried to fall in with her wishes but his anxiety that she might go too near the cliff edge kept him hovering round her. Their activities together were strenuous and varied. Arthur Nicholls was an outdoor man and a great walker. He wanted Charlotte's companionship in everything, and we even hear of her riding in Killarney and being thrown from her horse, which unfortunately stumbled.

Their honeymoon finished up at Banagher, Mr Nicholls' home town, where they stayed with his uncle, Dr Bell, who had brought him up. Charlotte was pleased with her new relations. She met, among others, Mary Bell, Arthur's cousin, who nine years after her death was to be the second Mrs Nicholls and who was destined to live with Arthur for forty years. Charlotte found, a little to her surprise, that Arthur himself was a much more important person in Ireland than he had ever appeared as an impecunious curate at Haworth. Everywhere she heard people singing his praises and many old friends and servants of the family congratulated her on her good fortune, telling her that she had married one of 'the best gentlemen in the country'. 'I trust I feel thankful to God', Charlotte wrote to Ellen, 'for having



enabled me to make what seems a right choice; and I pray to be enabled to repay as I ought the affectionate devotion of a truthful, honourable man.'

V

Charlotte's married life lasted only nine months. These months were some of the happiest she had ever experienced. 'My life', she told Ellen, 'is changed indeed—to be wanted continually—to be constantly called for and occupied seems so strange; yet it is a marvellously good thing. As yet I don't quite understand how some wives grow so selfish. As far as my experience of matrimony goes, I think it tends to draw you out and away from yourself.'

It is obvious that the qualms she had suffered beforehand, the fears that she was doing an unwise thing and perhaps betraying herself in accepting the second-best, were being dissipated by events. Love begets love, and Charlotte's feeling for her husband was growing deeper and stronger every day. Emotionally she had always led a life which was starved and frustrated. She had within her soul and heart a great wealth of affection to give. All this she now bestowed gratefully, thankfully, on Arthur Nicholls.

Dear Nell—During the last six weeks the colour of my thoughts is a good deal changed. I know more of the realities of life than I once did. I think many false ideas are propagated, perhaps unintentionally. I think those married women who indiscriminately urge their acquaintance to marry, much to blame. For my part, I can only say with deeper sincerity and fuller significance, what I always said in theory, 'Wait God's will'. Indeed, indeed, Nell, it is a solemn and strange and perilous thing for a woman to become a wife.

This is not the outpouring, as some are inclined to think, of a woman disappointed and baffled. 'I can only say with deeper sincerity . . . 'Wait God's will'. This is the key sentence, often omitted by biographers, and this is what Charlotte felt that she herself had done. She had not married 'indiscriminately'. Her marriage to Arthur Nicholls had been the slow working of God's will. Had not she once written to Ellen: 'Providence offers me



this destiny. Doubtless then it is the best for me.' Now she felt that this belief in Providence had repaid her a thousandfold.

It is true that she and Arthur Nicholls were not really very well suited. Kind, thoughtful, staunch though Arthur Nicholls was, he had many limitations, which Charlotte in the short space of their married life probably purposely obliterated from her mind. For her there was more than enough to compensate. After her agonized years of loneliness, the most wonderful blessing which never palled was the joy of being wanted. That in itself swamped and outshone doubt. And it must be remembered, too, that now she had not so much time to *think*. Every day there seemed to be something to do, some parish gathering, visiting with Arthur, or visitors to entertain. Arthur Nicholls, once the morose recluse, had blossomed out since obtaining his heart's desire, had put on twelve pounds in weight (much to Charlotte's delight) and altogether become a new man. All sorts of activities in the village now claimed his enthusiasm. 'We must do so and so', he would say to Charlotte, and, said Charlotte to Miss Wooler 'We *do* so and so, accordingly; and it generally seems the right thing. . . .'

As a response to the welcome they had been given on their return from Ireland, Mr and Mrs Nicholls gave a large supper and tea-drinking party in the village school-room—singers, ringers, Sunday-school teachers—five hundred souls in all. 'They seemed to enjoy it much', Charlotte wrote, 'and it was very pleasant, to see their happiness. One of the villagers in proposing my husband's health, described him as a "*consistent Christian and a kind gentleman*". I own the words touched me deeply.'

She could hardly realize her good fortune, her happiness. Everything was so satisfactory, so perfectly arranged. Her father was better and her affection for him, as she told Miss Wooler, seemed more intense than it had ever been: 'May God preserve him to us yet for some years! . . . Papa has taken no duty since we returned, and each time I see Mr Nicholls put on gown and surplice, I feel comforted to think that this marriage has secured Papa good aid in his old age.' All her letters at this time are



pregnant with gratitude for her blessings. It seemed as though she was being mellowed and humbled by happiness, and as though for the rest of her short life she was trying to make amends for some of the rather harsh and unkind things she had said of people in the past. She wanted her friends now to realize that all her fears before marriage had been swept away: that she no longer had any qualms, any doubts, any reservations. Mr Nicholls became 'Arthur', or 'my dear Arthur' and even 'my dear boy'. 'My life is different from what it used to be. May God make me thankful for it! I have a good, kind, attached husband, and every day makes my own attachment to him stronger.'

But how fared Currer Bell, the writer? When Ellen came that October on her last visit to Haworth, she asked Charlotte whether she had written anything during the last months, and Charlotte replied that Arthur thought her duties as a clergyman's wife left no time for writing. Ellen, who was not at all sure that she cared much for Mr Nicholls anyhow, turned to him to remonstrate. He answered forcibly that he had married not Currer Bell the novelist, but Charlotte Brontë the clergyman's daughter, and that Currer Bell might fly to heaven tomorrow for anything he cared! Whether he spoke jokingly or not, we cannot be sure. It is possible that he merely wanted to stress the fact that it was Charlotte the *woman* whom he loved—and nobody would have welcomed such an assurance more than Charlotte herself. Nevertheless there is probably truth in the suggestion which many critics have made that Charlotte's genius, if she had lived, would have been threatened by her marriage.

For Arthur Nicholls was extremely possessive. He was jealous over anything in his wife's life that he could not share, and he was something of a tyrant. Charlotte wrote to a friend that she had to obtain his permission before even going to sit by a favourite waterfall which she wished to enjoy in solitude. That he was uneasy about her friendship with Ellen there is ample proof. He wanted Ellen to burn all Charlotte's letters, threatening that if she did not do so he would have to censor them before they were sent off; and often stood over Charlotte to hurry her



when she was writing them. He did not want to share Charlotte, either with her friends or with the world. Her literary fame was to him no attraction, as can be seen after her death, when he resented all publicity, and tried to keep Charlotte's memory to himself. Soon after Charlotte died he refused, when asked by the stationer Greenwood, to christen Greenwood's baby 'Brontë' in her memory. Her wedding dress, left to his niece, must not be given away or lost sight of. The early Brontë manuscripts were not treasured by him, as they did not belong to the side of her nature which he valued.

Yet of his great love for her, there is no doubt. Years later, though happy in his re-marriage, he told somebody that his heart was in Charlotte's grave. He denied always, too, that he had ever discouraged Charlotte over her writing. Certainly he did not succeed in preventing her from writing as, even in those early and much occupied days of marriage, Charlotte began another novel *Emma*, published after her death as *Emma: a Fragment*, and she also left various other 'openings' to stories. That these were discussed with him has been proved. When the first chapter of *Emma* was read to him, his comment was: 'The critics will say you are beginning to repeat yourself', a criticism which Charlotte parried by saying that she would change all that as she always wrote beginnings of her novels two or three times over.

Obviously he had not the imaginative understanding of an artist. He was, as May Sinclair has said, 'a plain, robust, practical man, inimical to any dreams'. He was not Charlotte's soul-mate, he was in no way her intellectual equal. It is absurd to imagine that he was the Duke of Zamorna, or even M. Heger. We can never tell now what would have happened if Charlotte had lived, and whether in the end the passionate imaginative side of her nature would have rebelled at being swamped under a load of parochial activities as a clergyman's wife. Probably there would have been some sort of compromise. For where, after all, in life is there perfection? 'If women of intellect always waited for the ideal husband', Clement Shorter asserts drily, 'most of



them would die unmarried.' Arthur Nicholls may have had his weaknesses: he was bigoted, intolerant, jealous, sometimes morose. But he was also kind, conscientious, affectionate, reliable and sincere. Clement Shorter, who met him in the flesh, wrote of him afterwards: 'He impressed me as a peculiarly lovable man.'

## VI

The tragic end to Charlotte's few months of happiness came quickly. At first, after her marriage, her health had improved; but in November unfortunately she caught cold through getting wet. She and Arthur had gone for a walk on the moors, and he had suggested that they should extend their walk to a favourite waterfall which would be looking its finest after the melting of the snow. Charlotte, who had always wanted to see it in its winter glory, acquiesced at once. The rain came on, however, while they were watching it and they had to return 'under a stormy sky'. Charlotte changed her wet clothes at once and, in spite of the rain, she told Ellen that she had enjoyed the walk 'inexpressibly'; but afterwards she felt chilled, and very soon developed a sore throat and cold.

This was so usual to her in the winter months that at first it does not seem that she took very much notice. The cold hung on, but in January 1855 she and Mr Nicholls went away on a visit to Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth—still her persistent admirer—at Gawthorpe. It was Sir James who, a month or so earlier, had offered Mr Nicholls a living near Gawthorpe, holding out better prospects and better pay—in fact, a definite advancement in the Church. This, of course, Mr Nicholls was unable to accept, as he had every intention of fulfilling his promise to remain at Haworth Parsonage until his father-in-law's death—a promise which in fact, even after Charlotte had died, he faithfully kept. Nevertheless, the offer of the living had been kindly meant and Charlotte was grateful. The visit to the Kay-Shuttleworths only lasted three days, but it was long enough for Charlotte to increase her cold by walking in shoes that were too thin on some damp ground.



On her return she had planned to visit Ellen, but this visit had to be postponed as her health suddenly became worse. She was attacked by stomach-trouble, indigestion and continual nausea. At first this did not seem a matter for much alarm. She suspected that she was pregnant and sent for a doctor who confirmed her suspicions and told her that the sickness was natural and that it would pass. She tried to bear up and carry on with her normal life, but continuous attacks of sickness and faintness made this impossible; and at the end of January she took to her bed.

Just at this moment of her illness, the old and faithful Tabby, an inmate of the Parsonage for so many years, suddenly collapsed. She was taken to the home of her relations down the hill where, at the age of eighty-four, she died. Flossy, Anne's little dog, had died, too, that winter: 'He drooped for a single day and died quietly in the night without pain. . . . Perhaps no dog ever had a happier life.'

For weeks now there was sadness at the Parsonage and a feeling of strain and suspense. Instead of Charlotte's sickness getting better as the doctor had said, she grew steadily worse. Mr Nicholls, puzzled and anxious, wrote short bulletin notes to Ellen, postponing Charlotte's visit indefinitely, and seldom having any good news to report. Another doctor was called in who diagnosed no immediate danger, but said that the illness might last some time. Charlotte lay in bed day after day, too weak to get up, in a state of prostration and unable to eat. 'A wren would have starved', somebody said, 'on what she ate during those last six weeks.' Martha, who waited on her tenderly, tried, so Mrs Gaskell tells us, to cheer her with the thought of the baby that was coming. 'I dare say I shall be glad some day', Charlotte would reply, 'but I am so ill—so weary. . . .'

Her constitution was completely worn out. Marriage had revived her temporarily, but probably the experience was too much for her feeble health, and pregnancy was the final strain which broke her. The continual sickness prevented her from taking any nourishment at all and the seeds of consumption were taking their toll. Perhaps it was an ideal moment to die. She was



completely happy, surrounded by love and tenderness, and with no qualms about a future which might have brought disillusion.

Arthur Nicholls watched over her with the utmost devotion. The two or three last pathetic notes which Charlotte managed to write from her death-bed stress with repeated thankfulness her gratitude for his love:

My dear Ellen, I must write one line out of my weary bed. . . . I am not going to talk about my sufferings, it would be useless and painful—I want to give you an assurance which I know will comfort you—and that is that I find in my husband the tenderest nurse, the kindest support—the best earthly comfort that ever woman had. His patience never fails, and it is tried by sad days and broken nights.

I am reduced to greater weakness—I cannot talk—even to my dear, patient, constant Arthur, I can say but a few words at once.

Dear Amelia, Let me speak the plain truth—my sufferings are very great—my nights indescribable. . . . Medicine I have quite discontinued. If you can send me anything that will do good—*do*. As to my husband, my heart is knit to him—he is so tender, so good, helpful, patient. . . .

Towards the end of March there was a change in Charlotte's condition. Whereas before she had been unable to eat anything, now the nausea passed and she continually craved for food and drink and stimulants. She was given some beef-tea, spoonfuls of wine and water, mouthfuls of a light pudding. But it was too late. Her exhaustion was too great and she became delirious. In one of her lucid intervals she awakened to find her husband kneeling at her bedside, praying in low tones that God would spare her. Some of the anguish of this earthly parting seeped into her brain and consciousness: 'Oh, I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us, we have been so happy.'

Her lifelong search was over. It is thought that these were her last words—'so happy'. Her father, her husband and Martha Brown were standing at her bedside when, early on the morning of Saturday, March 31st, 1855, she died.



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